

“Mother Bird God”

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Based upon Luke 13:34-35; Acts 1:1-11

Today, as you know, is Mother’s Day. I hope today will be a day filled with joy and love for all of you. I know that it is a special day for many people; I also know that it is a painful day for others. For those who never had children but wanted them, who have loved their mothers or children but lost them, who never knew their mothers, or never experienced love from their mothers, there does not seem to be much to celebrate today. So, I have been ambivalent about recognizing the holiday too much in church and have always believed that if we did not do so, that would be fine because Mother’s Day was a Hallmark holiday, not a religious one anyway.

But this week, I learned to my surprise that Mother’s Day actually began as a church holiday.¹ It was started by a woman named Anna Jarvis, who had no children of her own. Jarvis wanted to give thanks for her mother, who spent her life doing amazing charitable work, including founding “Mother’s Work Clubs” during the Civil War to help teach mothers how to care for their children. So in 1908, Jarvis proposed having a day in her church when people could give thanks for the sacrifices that their own mothers made for them and others. The idea of having a day set aside to celebrate mothers was such a hit, that the practice soon spread to other churches and organizations. Eventually in 1914, Woodrow Wilson made the day a national holiday. But no sooner was the day on everyone’s calendar than merchants jumped to profit from it. This so horrified Anna Jarvis, that she spent the rest of her life, and the rest of her savings, protesting and challenging various organizations for corrupting her Mother’s Day. She wanted the day to be focused on giving thanks to God in church for good mothers, not focused on flowers, chocolates, or brunch.²

She didn’t win her battle, of course. In most households Mother’s Day now is much more of a secular holiday for gift-giving than a religious day of thanksgiving, and the standard measure of a mother’s “goodness” is not how charitable she was in service of Christ. Now as a society we can’t even agree on what makes a mother “good.” I counted no less than six different types of “good mothers” recognized by society today, all of which are celebrated as ideals by some, and criticized as disasters by others. There are *attachment* moms, who carry their little ones physically strapped to them as long as possible, co-sleep with them, and praise them constantly to build their self-esteem. These moms are wonderfully close to their children, but critics say this style of mothering raises safety concerns in the short term and differentiation issues in the long term. There are *helicopter* moms, who strive to protect their children from any and all threats, be they physical, emotion, non-organic, sugar-containing, or germ-filled. They keep their children wonderfully safe, but in so doing potentially limit their learning and resilience. There are *lawnmower* moms, who try to make the way clear for their children to succeed by reducing any obstacles in their path to success. They do their homework, their college applications, set up their job interviews, and more. Such mothers ensure that their

¹ See e.g. Coffey, Laura T., “Meet Anna Jarvis, the founder — and fighter — of Mother’s Day,” TODAY, posted May. 11, 2018 at 4:28 PM, retrieved from <https://www.today.com/parents/meet-anna-jarvis-founder-fighter-mother-s-day-t110796>

² *Ibid.*

children meet the benchmarks of success, but do not always give them the skills to achieve success on their own. There are *tiger* moms who use strict discipline to promote academically successful and obedient children, but potentially turn them into tortured perfectionists in the process, and *free-range* moms, who believe in letting their children learn and discover on their own with minimal supervision, but who risk endangering their children or being arrested for neglect in the process. Oh, and last but not least, there is in Hollywood what is known as a “bad” mom, who is really supposed to be seen as a good mom in disguise. She’s so tired of the stresses of parenting and working that she dreams of escaping the trials and tribulations of motherhood by going out and binge-drinking with other members of her PTA.

Maybe the existence of all these types tells us that it’s harder to win a “good mother” award today than it used to be, or maybe the existence of all of these types tells us that there are now multiple ways to be good mothers. I am not here to criticize anyone’s style today. But as we think about our mothers and these types, I’d like to invite you to consider one more approach to mothering, the approach of our God in Jesus Christ. I call it the *mother bird* type of mothering. I know that Jesus called God “Abba” or “Father.” But the Bible also affirms that our Triune God is beyond gender and holds lots of maternal as well as paternal imagery in it. Among those images are quite a number which compare God to some kind of mother bird. In *Genesis* Chapter 1, which I’ll be talking about more in a couple of weeks, the Hebrew word used to describe how the Holy Spirit hovered over the water to begin creation also means “brood.” (*Gen.* 1:2). In effect, God begins our world literally by hatching it. Throughout the *Psalms*, God is frequently described with wings, sheltering, carrying, and lifting up humanity out of trouble.³ In *Deuteronomy* 32:11, God is described as a mother eagle which hovers over her young.

But my favorite bird image for God is the one we heard today from Luke’s gospel. Jesus could have described himself as an eagle, and everyone would have recognized the Old Testament allusion. But instead he compared himself to a mother hen. “Oh Jerusalem, Jerusalem,” he cried, “the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing.” When people think of Jesus, they may imagine the blue-eyed, Caucasian, bearded Jesus of Hollywood, the suffering servant hanging on the cross frequently depicted in fine art, the good shepherd, or the glowing resurrected Christ with a crown. But I would venture to guess that far fewer people mentally picture a mother hen when they think about Jesus. Yet it too is a powerful and evocative image.

Mother hens are famous for the way that they protect their young. Look at these photographs of real hens, and you will get a sense of what Jesus wished he could do before he died. [*Slides of mother hens and chicks shown.*] He wanted to protect the people of Jerusalem from being harmed by the likes of Herod and the other corrupt powers-that-be, and he wanted to protect them from the harm of Sin. So, he described his love and inclinations as those of a mother hen, who wraps her wings around her chicks, or invites them to hide under her skirt of feathers. On YouTube there are a number of videos which show mother hens protecting their

³ See Psalm 17:8: “Keep me as the apple of your eye; hide me in the shadow of your wings”; Psalm 57:1: “... I will take refuge in the shadow of your wings until the disaster has passed”; and Psalm 91:4: “He will cover you with his feathers, and under his wings you will find refuge ...”

chicks this way. Most of them show a chicken family happily pecking for insects somewhere. Then a cat or a fox shows up, and suddenly all the chicks dive under the mother hen's feathers for protection. How a hen can hide half a dozen chicks underneath her without squashing or suffocating them is beyond my understanding. Chickens, I guess, are the clown cars of the bird world. But the point is that mother hens are extremely protective. That's why when someone hovers over-protectively over a child, she is called a mother hen.

Jesus wanted to protect the people of Jerusalem. But a mother hen cannot make her babies come underneath her wings. Some don't. She can't run after them all to corral them either. Jesus knew this, which is why he ended up doing more than a real mother hen could do. He took the over-protective instincts of a mother hen and magnified them a million-fold so that wherever God's children were, and whatever they were doing, they would still be under God's wings. Although life can harm us, the Resurrection proclaims that not even death can separate us from our mama hen. She's got us covered always.

Since "mother hen" has negative as well as positive connotations in our culture, and since Jesus gave his life to keep us safe, you might be thinking that by today's standards Jesus was a messianic helicopter mom at heart. But when we remember today's story of the Ascension, we discover that although Jesus was loving and concerned with our safety, he was not one to bubble wrap God's children or keep them from experiencing the real challenges of life. After forty or fifty days of visiting with people after the Resurrection, the risen Christ told his disciples that he had to go, and that they were going to take over his work. "Go share the Good News with the world," Jesus said, and then he took off.

It's in that moment that I think Jesus stopped being like a typical hen and became instead like a typical wood duck. The Bible doesn't expressly say that God is like a wood duck, so I'm taking some liberties here. Maybe wood ducks didn't live in Israel so the Psalmists were unfamiliar with their behavior. But if you were watching the prelude video today you get what I mean.⁴ Merganser wood ducks build their nests high up in the trees. Then after the babies are hatched, the mother leaves them and calls to them from down below outside the tree, often as much as five stories high. She expects her babies, without any adult pushing or prodding, to take a leap which to us seems terrifying and insane, and the truly astonishing thing is that they do because they want to be with her so badly. Some of the chicks are more eager than others to throw themselves out of the hole and hope they will bounce. But eventually they all jump, and when they do they discover that they do bounce. They throw themselves head first into a completely different life even before they can fly, and their mama is there to greet them and lead them to the water. Watching the video, the helicopter mom in me finds it easy to judge that mama duck. What kind of mother puts such a distance between her and her new little ones? What kind expects them to jump, instead of telling them to stay away from cliffs and tree tops and other dangerous places? The answer is a mother wood duck. She does this because she knows that they will be OK. She does this so that they will grow.

⁴ See "*Ducklings Jump from Nest 50 Feet in the Air*," *PBS NATURE*, posted April 7, 2015, retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bDJw43BJtCE> (and shown as prelude to worship).

Jesus knew this about his disciples too. He knew that with the help of the Holy Spirit they would be OK. He also knew that they would not grow into the apostles they were called to be if he remained with them. If he remained with him, they would have continued to expect him to make things happen. “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” they had asked him. “God’s timing is none of your business,” he said. “But *you* will receive the power of the Holy Spirit, and *you* will be my witnesses.” Notice the pronoun shift? It’s the same pronoun shift every good parent must use with her or his child if she or he ever wants the child to be an independent, successful adult. “Is it time for *you* to get me dressed?” the child asks. “No, but it is time for *you* to get dressed.” “Are *you* going to do my laundry today?” No, but today is the day when *you* will do your laundry.” “Are *you* ready now to do my homework, drive me to the movies, cook my dinner?” “No. The day has come when *you* are ready do those things.” This time of year, when young human chicks are graduating from high school and college, you can hear the wood duck call of human parents all over the place. “Time to jump kiddo! Time to take the leap into greater responsibility and adulthood.” Parents know that sending their kids to college or out into the world is not abandoning them. It is enabling them to grow and thrive.

But whether we are parents or not, we don’t always understand this as clearly when we are the chicks and God is the mama bird. We want God to make our lives easy. We want God to make it safe. We want God to build the kingdom right here and right now, so that it is neither a leap of faith to believe that such a world is possible, nor our responsibility to help create it. And darn it all, God won’t do any of that for us! That’s not how God works because even though Jesus loves us just like a mother hen, God wants us to grow up to be more than chickens. Our Mother Bird God wants us to be the kind of birds that can fly.

You know that famous text from *Isaiah* 40, “Those who wait upon the Lord will renew their strength and rise up on wings like eagles”? Faithful disciples aren’t hitchhiking on top of God-the-eagle’s wings in that passage. The text is referring to our own wings. We are rising up; we who wait for the Lord, (or really who bind ourselves to the Lord, as I’ve preached before), are the ones doing the flying. That’s the way God wants it to be because God is truly a good mother (as well as a good father), and knows that a child who has good self-esteem but isn’t resilient, who can’t do the work himself, who fears failure more than he loves learning, and who can’t stand to be on his own, isn’t going to grow up to be a happy, successful adult or faithful and successful disciple. But God will never abandon us, as Jesus assured his disciples before he ascended. The Spirit of God is with us always, the holy wind which lifts us up. This is even clearer when you realize that the word that’s translated “eagle” in Hebrew can also be translated as “vulture.” I know from being blessed to have lots of turkey vultures in my back yard that they do not flap their wings a lot like other birds do to fly; most of the time they ride the thermals. They glide on the winds that support them. This is how God supports us. When the time comes for us to do the work of God, and when we are finally brave enough to take the leap, then God stops being like a bird, and starts being like the wind under our wings.

I know that I am mixing way too many bird metaphors and similes today, but that’s because no single image can describe perfectly how God loves and cares for us, any more than a single metaphor can capture what makes a good mom. God loves us like a mother hen, who wants nothing more than to keep us safe. God loves us like a wood duck, who wants us to

experience the fullness of life, but unlike either a mama hen or duck, God will never fully let us go. This is what Jesus wanted his disciples to know and what we need to keep in mind as well. God is the wind that keeps us aloft and carries us to where we need to go to do the work of God in the world. God is with us always whether we are in the nest, on the ground, or caught falling somewhere in between. Therefore, we do not need to fear. Whether we are under God's wing or God is under ours, God who loves us fiercely like a good mother is with us, even until the end of the age.

How is God mothering you at this stage of your life? Are you feeling safe and cozy in the downy fluff of God's grace and love? Are you feeling as if you are standing on a precipice of change from which there will be no turning back? Are you feeling led or pushed into new levels of responsibility or new ways of doing ministry? Maybe you feel as though you are falling. Wherever you are, trust and believe the good news of the Gospel; our Mother God is with you and has the love and power to lift you up, carry you forward, and enable you to soar. Thanks be to God for ensuring that we all have a good mother to give thanks for in church, and to celebrate this and every day. Happy Mother's Day. Amen.