

“The G-d Who Gave You Birth”

Proverbs 6:20-23

Deuteronomy 32:1-3, 10-13, 15b-18

John 2:1-12

Growing up, I would see my extended family for the major holidays. I remember one Easter visit to my grandparents in Maryland. There were seven of us grandkids, so our parents regularly shuttled us out of the house to tire us out. That day, they took the lot of us to a park. Now, I must have been about middle school aged at the time and I have a cousin who's 6 years younger than me. As soon as we arrived at the park, we were all getting out of the cars and he shut his finger in the car door. I think I was the only one who saw him do it and I thought, “oh, crap. This is gonna be bad.” But his face was blank, in total shock. I asked him, “Chris, are you okay?” And he didn't say a word. He just wandered around, searching seriously, earnestly, until he found his mother. Then, holding his finger in front of him, he started wailing and crying, falling into her open arms. The moment struck me and, if I'm being totally honest, it confused me to no end. What was with the time delay? Didn't it hurt when it first happened? How on earth did finding his Mom mean that pain would suddenly be expressed – and loudly?

Maybe you have a similar story. There's something about finding that one who soothes and nurtures and tries to make all the pain go away that opens us up to let the pain out and to let it go. Having that person to go to – being that person for someone else – it is truly a sacred and beautiful thing. But I'm not going to stand here this morning and pretend that we all experience motherhood the same way. Some of us were blessed with rich, full, beautiful experiences of motherhood: as children, as mothers ourselves. But others have wounds from childhood; others struggled to have children or experienced motherhood as loss, grief, and conflict. Still others did not feel the calling to be mothers. For those of you who might be wary of the Mother's Day

sermon, it's not about measuring up: you must be this good at mothering to be blessed by G-d. Neither is it a rod of judgment, holding up an impossible standard to accuse and dismiss the hard work of giving life and nurturing it. This morning, we will be looking at mothering as part of the divine image: something that embraces both our love and our lack of love; our victories and our struggles.

You'll have to forgive me – the sermon this morning will proceed like Russian nesting dolls: within each mothering image, there is another smaller mother image, and on and on. So, we begin with creation. Before there was us, there was a Trinitarian G-d, one being in infinite relationship: Father, Son, Holy Spirit. More than any other single word, this G-d can be defined as love: overflowing, outpouring, and endless. And this G-d of love created all that is so that all creation would know the beauty of love and life. When humans were created, male and female, in the image of G-d, this creative impulse to make life and love flourish was one of our earliest gifts. After all, the first ever commandment in the Bible is, “be fruitful and multiply.” Here, G-d invites us to be partners in creation – to feel what it means to create, to give new life, in a sense, to mother whether we have children or not.

This theme carries forward in scripture to the first mother, Eve. Her name itself is related to the word for “life.” Adam calls her the, “mother of all living.” And Eve understands her connection to life itself very intimately. Yes, I know she was tempted and they both sinned. Yes, she and Adam were summarily booted from the garden, but... she remembers G-d when she gives birth to her firstborn. She calls him Cain, which is related to the verb that means, “to get,” “to acquire.” She names him “Cain” because, as she says in Genesis 4: “I have gotten a man from the Lord.” Eve sees that she has created something new together with G-d and so she, and not Adam, names this new creature; and she is overwhelmed with awe and praise.

So, this G-d who mothered all creation into existence has also gifted humanity with the ability to mother and bring forth new life, but there are yet more nesting dolls. We move ahead through Abraham to find that G-d has called a people into being: where there were no people, now there is a people of G-d. Where only idols and falsehoods were known, now there is revelation of beauty and truth. The passage from Deuteronomy comes from one of the many speeches of Moses near the end of his life. The people are almost there – almost across the border into the promised land – but Moses knows that he won't be joining them. So, he preaches many sermons and makes many speeches to remind them of who G-d is, who they are, and how they should respond.

What's interesting about the images that he chooses, though, is that most of them are about G-d mothering the people. Moses compares G-d to a mother eagle who protects her young and teaches them how to fly. Moses talks about G-d shielding, caring, and guarding the people – even feeding and nursing them so that they would grow strong and healthy. And since G-d has been closer and more sustaining than any human mother could possibly be, Moses is shocked and dismayed that the people have gone after foreign g-ds. The verse that closes this section is pointed, indeed: “You were unmindful of the Rock that bore you; you forgot the G-d who gave you birth.” In this verse, we find Hebrew poetry with the two lines in parallel. It's difficult to tell from our translation, but, “the Rock that bore you” is closer to “begot”- the word that would be used for a father of a child. Coupled together with the next line, “the G-d who gave you birth,” we see that Moses is saying that this G-d, your G-d, is father and mother to you. For all the good and the bad you experience in life otherwise, you always have G-d as father and mother, unfailing and constant.

I love this line, “the G-d who gave you birth” and it’s been percolating around my head all week. And out of the blue, it struck me: this G-d who gave us birth was also born. I don’t mean in the beginning, before all creation, but as a little baby: Jesus of Nazareth. This means that not only do we have a G-d at whose command life exploded onto the watery deep, a G-d who showed us the joy of nurturing new life, a G-d who created and called together a holy people; our G-d has personally experienced motherhood from both sides. When Jesus came to earth, he decided to be mothered by his own broken creation – to be vulnerable, to have the ancient equivalent of a diaper change, to have boo boos and scars, to grow under human guidance. G-d showed us the blessing of receiving and accepting love and nurture just as surely as we are blessed to give love and nurture.

And we don’t have terribly many stories of Jesus relating to his earthly mother, but the wedding in Cana is surely a crowd pleaser. In the Gospel of John, there are only two prominent stories of Jesus and Mary: Jesus changing water into wine at the beginning of his public ministry and Mary at the foot of the cross at the end of Jesus’ life. Here, Jesus and his disciples have been invited to a wedding. It seems likely that it was for a family friend or a relative. After all, Mary is keeping better tabs on the wine supply than even the servants and the chief steward. Mary seems to be the first one to notice that the wine is out and she tells Jesus. Jesus seems to demur, but Mary tells the servants that they should do whatever Jesus says to do: a recipe for excitement if ever I heard one. Now, the stone water jars were there for hand washing – they were at a feast, after all – and in total they would hold 120-180 gallons of water. That much water would weigh at least 200 pounds (and that’s not counting the weight of the jars!). Jesus just says fill them up and let the chief steward taste some.

Now, even though this is the first act of Jesus' public ministry in John, there's something quite interesting about it. It's public and private at the same time. Think about it: who knows about this miracle? Mary, Jesus, and the servants. All the chief steward knows is that the wine is good and he commends the, almost certainly very confused, bridegroom. The guests don't know, the family doesn't know – just those who listened to Jesus and trusted his word.

Jesus listened to his mother and he saved the wedding celebration. At that time, to run out of supplies for a wedding feast would have been a great shame and dishonor to a family. But there is Jesus, hearing his mother's request, tending to human concern, and providing with impossible abundance beyond what one would ever ask. Like so many mothers, he works behind the scenes – not for the credit, not for attention, but for the good of the family. As the unnamed married couple start their new life, Jesus starts his and heads out into the world.

In this Eastertide, we remember that Jesus lived and died and was reborn – appearing in many places and to many different people. G-d raised Jesus to new life this season. In Christ, this mothering impulse to love and give life does not cease. It rings through all of our lives, our new families, our deaths, and our rebirth. So, to worship our mothering G-d, to honor the mothering souls in all our lives, let us give life and nurture and cherish it wherever we find it on the path before us. If it be through children, let us love and raise them with all our hearts. If it be through creative endeavor: through art and design and construction, let us create for the flourishing of all. If it be through justice and service work, let us proudly work with and on behalf of the least among us as the saints before have taught us. Whatever you do, remember the soul of the small child seeking comfort and relief – and remember G-d works through those with soothing words and strengthens our every step. Amen.