"Gods, Goddesses, and God"

Isaiah 66: 6-13
The Womanly Song of God by Catherine de Vinck

Rev. Brian Heron
Eastminster Presbyterian Church
May 9, 2010
Mother's Day

I absolutely love the way this poem by Catherine de Vinck ends, "I am a God of a thousand names: why cannot one of them be Woman Singing?" Think about all of the names we use for God: Loving and Gracious God, Almighty God, Father God, Creator God, Holy God, the One God, Abba-Father, and the Righteous One, among hundreds of others we find in the Bible. And for some reason all of those seem palatable to us. If I understand our congregation well none of those make our skin tingle when we say them.

But, for some reason when we start speaking about God as a Mother many of us take a little breath. When we start characterizing God as having feminine or womanly attributes some of us stiffen up in our chairs. Maybe we even look around at each other to see how our friends are reacting to hearing Mother God.

My purpose today is not to convince you that you should start praying to the Mother God in your prayers. I am not here to make the case that God is much more like a woman than a man. What I am here to do today is to honor our long standing belief in the One God. One of the major pillars of our faith is that God may be described in hundreds, even thousands of different ways, but we still believe in the One God. It all starts with the doctrine of the Trinity: one God in three different persons. When we speak of the trinity we use either our traditional language of Father, Son and Holy Ghost or we use our more contemporary version, Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. At the very outset we have six different words for the One God already.

What I really want to say is that if we truly believe in the one God then we need to make room for the multitude of ways we describe God. In the Jewish tradition God is so far beyond our descriptions that they don't say the name of God out loud. God is "the one who will remain unnamed" they often say. On the other hand, in our tradition we use all kinds of descriptions of God even though, in the same breath, we acknowledge that no one description of God can capture God's fullness.

In Hinduism there are approximately 330,000 supernatural beings that different Hindus worship as incarnations of God. On the one hand, it's as if they believe in literally thousands of different gods and goddesses. But, at the core of this belief is that all of creation and all of life is sacred and so they have a god for almost every aspect of life. We Christians do essentially the same thing, but rather than have thousands of different gods, we have one God with thousands of different names, characteristics and adjectives.

Today, being Mother's Day, all I really want to do is to highlight that one of those many attributes of God also includes the feminine face of God. Again, I am not saying that God is a Mother any more than I would say that God is a Father or a Supreme Court Judge or the white-haired man sitting on a throne. I am saying the same thing that Catherine de Vinck says, If God is a "*God of a thousand names: why cannot one of them be Woman Singing?"*

Indeed one of them should be "woman singing." We just finished singing "El Shaddai" just a few minutes ago. Does anyone here know the literal translation of "El Shaddai?" You probably won't be surprised to know that the word "El" is a common name for God in the Hebrew Scriptures. It means, "might, strength or power." What probably will surprise you is

that El Shaddai should actually have a PG-rating attached to it. The root of shaddai is the Hebrew word "shad" which literally means "breast." When we were singing "El Shaddai" we were literally singing to the "Mighty Breasted One." Now, of course that is not how it gets translated. Hebrew is a poetic language and images are an important part of conveying meaning. How El Shaddai is often translated is, the "all sufficient one" stemming from the idea of the breast being all-sufficient for one's nourishment and life.

Maybe it makes us squirm in our seats a little because we aren't used to hearing about God's character being compared to the body and functions of a woman. But, really isn't that strange? We don't squirm much when God is compared to a mighty soldier going into battle. We don't squirm when God is compared to the Father who is protective and who provides for his family. We don't squirm when God is described as the wise old man of the village. And it shouldn't make us squirm when the Bible uses feminine and maternal images of God.

Erik read earlier this account from Isaiah 66 where the lines between the character of Israel and the character of God are very thin. God is speaking of Israel when He (and I use that term very loosely) begins to speak of Israel in the language of childbirth. **"Before she was in labor she gave birth; before her pain came upon her she delivered a son…Shall I open the womb and not deliver? says the Lord; shall I, the one who delivers, shut the womb."** Then the voice of God carries the image even further, **"Rejoice with Jerusalem, and be glad for her…that you may be satisfied from her consoling breast; that you may drink deeply with delight from her glorious bosom…For thus says the Lord…you shall nurse and be carried on her arm, and dandled on her knees."** Up to this point this is all about Israel. But, after God has so poetically and graphically described Israel in feminine terms, God then says, *"and I am just like that!"* The actual text says, **"As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you."**

Really aren't these wonderful images—that we have come from the womb of God, that God labored to bring Her people into existence and into life, that in our most fragile state we can suckle at the breast of God for the all the nourishment we need. Doesn't this just add to the depth and breadth of how we understand God? Yes, God is like a Father. Yes, God is like a judge. Yes, God is like the almighty warrior. And yes, God is also like the woman giving birth and nursing her child. If we truly believe in the One God then we need to honor the feminine aspects of God just as much as the masculine aspects.

Here are just a few more instances where God is described in feminine terms in the Bible.

1. Isaiah 42:12—God says, "Now I will cry out like a woman in labor, I will gasp and pant."
2. Numbers 11: 12—Moses is angry with God saying, `Did I conceive all this people? Did I give birth to them, that you should say to me, "Carry them in your bosom, as a nurse carries a sucking child."' Moses is saying, "Look, God you are the one conceived and gave birth, you nurse your own children!"
3. Isaiah 49: 14-15—Israel is complaining that God has forsaken them and God replies, "Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her of her womb?"
4. Psalm 22: 9—God plays the midwife here as the psalmist writes, "Yet it was you who took me from the womb; you kept me safe on my mother's breast. On you I was cast from my birth."

Again, if we believe in the One God then it is important for us to honor the hundreds of different traits and names for God. There is one God whom we experience as loving, gracious,

almighty, holy, and divine. There is one God whom we call Abba Father and also Woman Singing. There is one God who is like the father who welcomes the prodigal home and is like the mother who will not forsake her nursing child.

There is another reason to honor the feminine just as much as the masculine images of God. Remember in Genesis 1: 27 how Creation unfolded on the sixth day. "So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them." Isn't it strange that when we use feminine language for God we all feel a little squeamish and uncomfortable? Have you ever thought where that came from? It's not from the Bible. It's from our confessions hundreds of years later. In one of our most basic stories it says that God's character is like our human character, that is, male and female. God has both masculine and feminine qualities, is how our creation story tells it.

There is one last very important reason to honor the feminine qualities of God as well as the masculine. All of the images we have of God are just that—they are just images. They are just words and pictures that help us to relate to God. In the end what is important is not what images we use, but whether those images help us connect to God.

Almost twenty years ago I was having a discussion with a woman who was decrying the fact that more and more pastors were using inclusive language when speaking of God. Our church in Wisconsin had a relationship with a domestic violence shelter and I was making the case that some of the women in the shelter had experienced a great deal of abuse by their fathers and husbands. I said that for many of them to speak of God as Father may not only be difficult but may even present a barrier to having a relationship with God. What she said next changed my own relationship with God forever. She said to me, *"Yes, but Pastor Brian, God is the Father that these women never had."* Bingo. She was right. God can come in and be the loving, healing father figure that they never had. What she didn't realize at the time, however, was that as soon as she said it a light went off for me as well. Many of you know my first mother left when I was 3 years old. I suddenly realized that God was the Mother I never had. Is God actually a Mother? I don't think so. But, has the image of God as a Mother brought me healing and hope and closer to God. Absolutely.

As Catherine de Vinck says, "I am a God of a thousand names: why can't one of them be Woman Singing?" To all the women and mothers in our lives today we just have one message. Who you are is special. The roles you play in life are special. What you do is special. How special? So special that God has been compared to you! So special that when the people of Israel tried to describe God they pointed at a woman and said, *"I think God looks and acts a lot like her."* And then they broke into a rendition of El Shaddai.

Happy Mother's Day. I think we are closer to God because of the mothers and women in our lives. Amen.