

## The Maternal God

The other day, my daughter gave me the hairy eyeball when she heard me referring to God as "she."

She was quite sure I misspoke and told me to be more careful in the future, because, as she explained, "everyone knows God's not a girl, dad."

Which gave me my in to talk to her about the book of our earliest times, Genesis, where our mothers and fathers in faith imagine the beginning of all things; and there is God, creating humanity last of all, creating "humankind in God's own image, in the image of God they were created, male and female, God created them." Gen. 1:27.

My daughter was a bit startled by this, and since I rarely startle her, I decided to keep going.

I took her to the poetry of the prophets, starting with Isaiah, through whom God implores:

"Can a woman forget her nursing child or show no compassion for the child of her womb?

How then can I forget you, oh my people?"

And again, "As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you..." (Isaiah 66:13).

The prophet Hosea sings the same song:

"How can I give you up?

It was I who taught you to walk.

I took you up in my arms; I healed you, led you with cords of human kindness, with bands of love.

I bent down to you and fed you..." (Hosea 11:3-4).

I understand my daughter's discomfort, her unease in thinking about God as somehow soft, somehow vulnerable, meaning, in our still sexist age, somehow female.

Perhaps some of you share that unease.

How, after all, can we think of Almighty God, the creator of heaven and earth, as soft, as vulnerable?

Eli Weisel, a concentration camp survivor and Noble peace prize laureate, tells of the horrific day when the Nazi's hanged six teenagers to make some ghastly point.

As the boys hang, dying, twitching on the gallows, a man in the crowd roars out:

"Where is our God?!"

And an old rabbi standing nearby replies, looking at the boys on the gallows,

"There is our God."

I share this story just about once a year in one homily or another.

I keep returning to it because perhaps more than any other story in modern times, it tells us a profound truth about God, a truth we often shut our eyes to, because it seems to ask too much of us.

The sense of a suffering, vulnerable God is not widely accepted by many of the Jewish faith, and after the holocaust, many simply walked away from the faith of their parents.

Because God does not swoop in for the rescue, many now say, God either doesn't exist, or worse, God is indifferent to human suffering.

It seems that same rejection of God is consuming modern life: among those who simply chalk up the world's horrors to a non-existent or indifferent God, as well as those who tout a God of revenge or retribution, of "our God is badder than your God" tribalism and nationalism.

And what about us?

How do we grapple with this notion of a vulnerable God; a God who doesn't rescue us from our crosses, but who comes and hangs there with us?

And yet, the vulnerable God is as ancient as our faith.

You heard it today in Abram's encounter with God.

One thing in the story that is particularly strange to our modern ears is this whole business of cutting the cows and goats in half, and arranging the bodies to form a pathway between the split corpses of the animals.

This isn't about sacrifice, it's about how agreements get sealed.

While we seal a deal with a handshake or our signature, back then, the parties to the agreement both walk between the dead animals – sending this message:

"If I welsh on this deal, may what happened to these cows happen to me."

In this way, the parties submit to one another.

But not today.

Today, only God walks between the split animals.

Only God calls down the consequence: "if I welsch on this deal, let me be like these mutilated cows."

Only God, in his covenant with Abram, binds himself completely to us; only God puts God's neck on the chopping block for us.

And what about Abram while this vulnerable God lays herself out for us — in love?

He's asleep.

Sound familiar?

Which, in a sort of round about way, brings us to the question somebody asked me just the other day about why the flags that used to be up here by the altar are now in the back room?

And I replied that in our 2000-year history as a church, the practice of allowing national flags in the sacred spaces of the church is a very recent concession to national pride and patriotism.

It seems to have started during World War I but really took off during World War II.

The flags are somewhere else now -- not because I'm anti-American -- but because the American eagle - at the top of every church flagpole, is the wrong bird for us Christians to focus on.

Eagles, as we Americans know, as the Roman Empire knew before us, are majestic birds of prey.

It is a fearsome bird that's beautiful and imposing but just out of place here — because the bird that our faith calls us to look to as our role model, the bird that actually looks like and acts like God: the bird that

ought to be at the top of every church flagpole, isn't the majestic eagle -- it's the chicken!

Don't take my word for it; listen to Jesus!

He's telling us so in today's gospel, as he laments the hard hearts of his own people.

He's not longing to carry them off on eagle's wings.

No, Jesus, is the mother hen - protective yet defenseless - loving, yet totally vulnerable to the teeth of that wily old fox.

Chest out, wings spread wide, the perfect target to be eaten by the foxes of this world: all the while, safeguarding her young brood behind her.

And at the same time, grieving for the chicks: especially for the Herod's, the Pilate's, the Trump's, the ones who have it all together, who refuse to seek the safety she offers in her death...

And this is why Jesus is so maddening!

Just when we think we have a God of power and might, just when we think God invites us to live lives of power and might, here comes Jesus, the mother hen.

"Imitate me," Paul says today, "as I imitate Christ."

In other words, be a chicken!

And that's why you can't have an eagle staring at you from up here - because your God and mine isn't like an eagle at all, your God and mine - is like a chicken.

"Imitate me," says Paul, "as I imitate Christ."

Sit with that for a minute while I tell you one last story.

Most of you remember back in 1991, a couple of years after the Berlin Wall fell, and shortly after the Soviet Union collapsed.

“Perhaps you'll remember on August 20, 1991, when martial law is declared in Russia, and Boris Yeltzin is holding on to civilian power by a thread.

The army is mobilized and a coup begins: everyone is told to go home and it appears the old guard is making a comeback.

Just then, the babushkas, the old Russian ladies who for nearly 80 years kept the church alive in a country that was officially atheist; these old ladies who are laughed at and mocked for years -- the babushkas come out that night.

Some of these old ladies feed the pro-democracy supporters, others help out at medical stations, some kneel and pray for a miracle, and still others climb on top of the tanks and, staring into the slits at the army men inside, tell them that now they have new orders, orders from God:

“You shall not kill.”

The young men, listening to their grandmothers, get out of their tanks.

The attack never comes.

And three days later, the tide turns, and the old guard creeps away.” T. Long, *Talking Ourselves into Being Christian* (paraphrased).

Mother hens save the day for Mother Russia.

Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem.

Once there, he will spread his wings, and bare his chest, and the fox will indeed devour him.

The chicks will scatter, not one stands with him.

"Where is our God?!"

The shout goes out from so many lips.

He is there, hanging on the tree.

Perhaps during this season of lent we might reconsider our love affair with eagles and foxes.

Perhaps we can instead seek to nestle tightly into the bosom of this loving God, who is our mother, and our father, who is indeed, our best friend.

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