

Lent 2, Year C  
Marc 13, 2022  
Church of the Ascension  
Meghan Murphy-Gill

God as parent. It's one of many ways to contemplate the divine. That ineffable mystery at the heart of all that is. And thanks to our Trinitarian formula—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—it's a favored if not favorite of the church.

It's no wonder. We all have parents, don't we? Whether we live with them or are estranged from them or hold them at arm's length, that we have come from another person, from two people, is the fact of our existence. We did not simply appear out of thin air, the result of a magician's trick. That we are is thanks to our parents.

It's a challenging metaphor for some, especially if you grew up with a father—or mother—you wouldn't exactly describe as benevolent. Loving. Gentle. Our experience of our own parents can certainly color our perception of God's relationship to us. For some with less than fond memories of growing up in their parents' household, the notion of God as Father is a comfort. If you can't imagine yourself in the loving arms of your earthly father, there is God the Father in whom you can rest. For others who have experienced abuse, whether physical, sexual, or emotional, God as parent translates to God as unsafe, scary, a beast not to poke lest it wake and wreak havoc on all in its path.

Sadly, the percentage of people who grew up with at least one abusive parent is a troublingly high. And so, I'm always aware, if not outright wary, when we in the church talk about God as Father, or even Mother, without some deeper consideration of our experience of parents and how God as parent might enhance a positive understanding or offer something different, something restful, something loving to people with a negative perception of parent.

We are blessed today in our readings, this Second Sunday of Lent, with two parental images of God. Our first reading, from Genesis, I find particularly endearing. God has appeared to Abram in a vision, and I can just see it: God puts an arm around Abram's shoulder and points with the other arm into the sky, sweeps it across the horizon, showing Abram all that he will inherit.

Now, Abram, when with God in visions or otherwise, always comes across to me as a nervous but eager oldest child, the one who will inherit the family business, the one who bears the weight of carrying on the family name and the sense of pride, honor, and dignity that it has meant for generations. He so wants to do right by his father, but the responsibility of it is almost too much to bear. He could fail! He needs his father to show him the ropes, but even then, how could he, Abram, plain old Abram, possibly be the one to lead the family? He is quite advanced in age by this point and doesn't even have his own children.

Before Abram can get a single word out in this vision, because God knew Abram was going to protest, was going to ask questions, God says, "Do not be afraid. I am your shield."

Do not be afraid. I am your shield.

How often have you needed to hear these words? How many of you need to hear them now?

Don't be afraid. I'm here to protect you, God says.

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When we get to our Gospel today, this time Jesus makes the comparison between God and a parent, and this time, Jesus compares himself to a mother hen.

The Pharisees have warned Jesus that Herod is after him and that he ought to get out of town. Herod wants to kill him! But Jesus turns to them and reminds them who needs protecting: “You tell that fox for me,” he says, “Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work’, and you want *me* to get a move on? Because prophets don’t get killed unless they’re in Jerusalem? How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!”

The image is so striking. I’m so glad that Nathanael included an image of the mother hen and her brood on your bulletins to stir your imagination. The incarnate Word of God, gathering us like baby chicks under their wing.

Do not be afraid. I am your shield.

I’ve been pondering this image this second week of Lent, when so much of the imagery of the season focuses on the desert experience of Jesus, an experience I have trouble separating from loneliness and fear. We even have a simple bowl of sand and rocks to pray with. We have buried a certain word that begins with A. We speak of going without, giving up, and letting go.

But our readings today offer us imagery that is not so much an alternative to Lent as time spent in a desert or in a wilderness, but how to think about our relationship with God when we otherwise might feel lonely and afraid. Perhaps in our solitude with God, in our walk through the desert, in our journey through the wilderness, if we have drawn closer to God, and if God is like a shield, what have we to fear? If God is like a mother hen who gathers her brood under her wing, who can possibly hurt us?

The readings do, however, offer an alternative way to think about Lent. Can this period of fasting and repentance be less about making ourselves better or making us feel more deserving of God’s love? I know that it is not always the case, but no child should have to earn the love of a parent. Know this: You are already loved as you are. God has been bursting with a boundless love for you before you were even in your mother’s womb.

What might it be like for you to consider Lent as a time to draw closer to God? Or to think of your Lenten practices as ways not to earn God’s love, but to make you more aware of it, more present to it? What might it be like to tuck yourself under the shoulder of God the benevolent father who wants to give you the whole world? What might it feel like to allow yourself to be gathered into the soft wings of a God the mother hen who will stop at nothing to protect you and your brothers and sisters from harm?

I pray for you and for me that we might be open to the possibilities of a Lent spent in rest and retreat rather than a series of endurance tests. And I pray that you and I can allow ourselves to experience the infinite love of our creator.