

“Journey Toward a Feminine God”

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Proverbs 8: 22-31; “Sequence for the Holy Spirit,” by Hildegard of Bingen; Luke 13: 10-13

On this Mother's Day, the day of Women's Journeys, I want to share a piece of my own path towards a God who is mother. Like many changes, it was both a struggle and the occasion of great grace.

How we see God can have an enormous impact on how we view ourselves, how we perceive “right relations” with those around us, and how we experience both our world and our place in it. If God is primarily a judge, we will judge both ourselves and those around us, by whatever yardstick we believe God will use. If God is primarily a monarch, we may be more willing to unquestioningly accept the laws of our society. And if God is always a male, as Mary Daly pointed out four decades ago, the male is God.

I would never assume that those here cling tightly and exclusively to traditional visions of God – I am perhaps preaching to the choir – but I also know that the road to expanding our images of God can be a bit rocky, and I want today to share with you some of my struggles on the road – knowing all along that I have not yet arrived, that we never really arrive, that everything we might say about God is always accompanied by a caveat: God is a king, a lover, primal energy, the love we have for each other – but God is also not just a king, not only a lover, not merely the primal energy, but always something more as well.

My particular journey, like everyone's, is bounded. One of the elements that shapes my relationship with and my vision of the Holy is the fact that I am primarily a concrete thinker. I could wish I were an abstract thinker, but I am, alas, not – if I were, perhaps I would've studied theology instead of sociology. But one consequence of this reality of concrete thinking is that I am less comfortable with an abstract, philosophical, “pure energy” image of God. Metaphors are rich for me, and I'm more at ease with a more concrete set of images, so I tend to relate most easily to God as a person (but of course, always something more as well), but a being with whom I can have a personal relationship.

I started a conscious relationship with God very comfortable with the image of God as Father and Lord. When, in my early twenties, I was part of a religious order of sisters, we were encouraged – and I thoroughly cooperated – to think of Jesus as our lover, even our spouse. (This raised some perhaps naïve issues about how priests and brothers related to Jesus, but a strong sense of self-preservation kept me from voicing my questions.) But

by my mid-twenties, I had had my feminist click – the moment when you realize that all is not right with the world – and I wondered about the intense – and often exclusive – masculinity of God.

The Judeo-Christian tradition of a feminine God is long and rich, if somewhat hidden – the pieces of scripture that support such an image do not often appear in the lectionary that makes up our weekly portion of biblical text (I won't go into who gets to decide what fragments of Scripture we hear). But those inclusive pieces are there in the Bible – the assurance in Genesis that men AND women are created in the image and likeness of God; God as a woman in labor in Isaiah; the image of Sophia being co-mingled God before all creation, playing, dancing and laughing that we heard in Proverbs; Psalm 131, where God is a mother on which our soul might rest; Jesus longing to draw the people of Jerusalem to himself like a mother hen sheltering her chicks under her wings.

And the Christian tradition, particularly of the mystics, rejoices in feminine images, even for Jesus, whom Julian of Norwich, a fourteenth-century Englishwoman, describes as feeding us at his breast, and who says, “Jesus Christ is our true mother. We have our being from him, where the foundation of motherhood begins.” Hildegard of Bingen, the 12th century German nun, sings of the spirit of God: “She rubs oil into wounds, she is glistening life.” Even Pope John Paul – the first – assured us, “God is our Father. God is also our Mother.” So I had plenty of sources to rely on when I began exploring God as feminine.

I could pray easily to a feminine God, and could experience that God as warm and loving. At first that was enough. But I noticed that, when I imagined God as a woman, power and strength were absent. For me, when God was a woman, God was a wuss. Frustrating.

At the time, I was involved with a group of Catholic feminists in Rhode Island. We called ourselves “Spirited Women,” and together, we supported each other, explored our spirituality, critiqued the Church, and annoyed our local bishop. With them, I learned how to plan prayer vigils, retreats and conferences, led rallies at – and in – the cathedral, made speeches, held press conferences, and wrote letters. They empowered me, and gave me rich examples of strong, feisty women. But still, that didn't translate in my prayer life – when God was a woman, God remained sweet, gentle, loving, and a wuss.

I moved to New Jersey in the early 90s, with the love of Spirited Women at my back. I started a new job and began settling in, but about two months after I moved here, a cherished colleague of mine from my job in Rhode Island went missing, along with her husband and 8-year-old daughter, under circumstances that seemed to indicate that something was terribly wrong. It was six weeks before their bodies were found, killed by a business associate of Alice's husband Ernie. When I turned to place Alice, Emily and Ernie into the arms of my warm and loving feminine God, I discovered, to my astonishment, that I was facing a ferocious mother bear, enraged by the harm done to her children. I encountered an enormously strong God, undeniably female, unlike anything I had come to expect. Never again could Mother

God/Sister God be powerless for me. I felt as if God herself had intervened, and expanded my image of her, felt like the woman of today's gospel, whom Jesus enabled to stand upright after years of struggle.

Annie Dillard says in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, "I cannot cause light; the most I can do is try to put myself in the path of its beam." It may be that the changes we want to make, the ways we wish to grow, may come to us as gifts from God. Just when we despair that we cannot change on our own, we may learn that we don't have to rely only on ourselves. We can come to see more clearly the inclusiveness of God, and the beauty and worth of all the creations of the Holy, and not just through our own struggles, but through the unbidden touch of God on our hearts.