

Of Chickens and Foxes

Watching the brave women of Ukraine, as they gather up children and the elderly, is a stunning reminder of the many times our scriptures speak of God as a woman.

It begins in the book of our earliest times, Genesis, where our mothers and fathers in faith imagine the beginning of all things.

As God creates "humankind in God's own image, in the image of God they're created, male and female, God creates them." Gen. 1:27.

It's in the poetry of the prophets, 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 asks: "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 ... and fed you..." (Hosea 11:3-4).

And yet so many people are really uncomfortable when we speak of God as our Mother.

When we picture God as vulnerable.

How, after all, can we think of Almighty God, the creator of heaven and earth, the one who rescued his people from Pharaoh, as soft?

As vulnerable?

Eli Wiesel, 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 Wiesel whispers to himself:

"There is our God, hanging from the gallows." Night, 65.

I try to share this story every year.

I keep returning to it because perhaps more than any other story, it tells us a profound truth about God.

A truth to which we often shut our eyes.

Because it seems to ask too much.

The sense of a suffering, vulnerable God is not widely accepted by many Jews or Christians.

Which is why after the holocaust many Jews left the faith, and Christianity saw an upswing in a nationalistic, tribal god.

It's that view that fuels things like the fabulously popular Left Behind series, which has Jesus as an avenging Rambo-type savior.

It's what fuels our too common retreat into a wholly private faith.

One that's only concerned with my own salvation.

The rest of the world be damned.

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 instead comes and hangs there with us?

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

It's there in Abram's encounter with God.

It's there in this business of cutting the cows and goats in half.

Then making a tunnel out of the split carcasses, as they lean against each other.

This isn't about sacrifice.

It's about deal making.

We seal a deal with a handshake or our signature.

But back then, the dealmakers both walk through that tunnel beneath the dead animals.

Signifying this:

“If I renege on this deal, may I become like this cow.”

Those mutual pronouncements seal the deal.

But did you hear what happened this morning?

Only God walks through the tunnel.

Only God vows: “If I renege on this deal, let me become like this cow.”

Only God puts God’s neck on the block for us.

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

He’s asleep.

Sound familiar?

Which, in a sort of roundabout way, brings us to the question Fr Warren and I chatted about the other day.

Which is, why we don’t display national flags in our sanctuary?

I shared with him our Bishop's reflection that in our 2000-year history as a church, the practice of allowing national flags in the church is a very recent development.

It started during World War I, but really took off during World War II.

The flags don't belong not because our bishop is anti-American -- but because the American eagle -- at the top of every flagpole, is the wrong bird for Christians to focus on.

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

This fearsome bird is beautiful and imposing, but definitely out of place here.

Because the bird that our faith calls us to look to as a role model, the bird that is most like God, 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 Herods and the Pilates and the Putins.

The ones who think they have it all together.

The folks who refuse to seek the safety she offers — in her death.

Isn't this why Jesus is so maddening?

Just when we think we have a God of power and might, just when we think we can 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!

So that's why we 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 mother hen.

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

The war in Ukraine is a reminder that Russia had a chance to choose a different path not so long ago.

Perhaps they would have, if only they'd listened to their women.

"Do you remember on August 20, 1991, when martial law is declared in Russia, and Boris Yeltzin is holding onto civilian power by a thread?

The army is mobilized and a coup begins.

Everyone is told to go home.

The old guard is making a comeback.

But 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 women who are laughed at and mocked for years -- the babushkas are out that night.

Some of these old ladies bring food to the pro-democracy activists.

Others help out at medical stations.

Still more kneel and pray.

And then there's those who climb on top of the tanks.

Stare into the slits at the army men inside.

And tell them that now, they have new orders.

From God.

'You shall not kill.'

The young men listen to their grandmas.

They get out of their tanks.

And soon after, the tide turns as the old guard creeps away." T. Long, Talking Ourselves into Being Christian (paraphrased).

Mother hens save the day for Mother Russia.

Will the mothers of Ukraine be able to do the same?

Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem.

When he arrives, he will spread his wings, and bare his chest, and the fox will indeed devour him.

The chicks will scatter.

No one stands with him.

Not one.

"Where is our God?!"

That cry erupts across the centuries.

He is there, hanging on a 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.

This God who is our mother.

And our father.

Who is indeed, our very best friend.

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