

**Framing the Image of God**  
**Isaiah 64: 4-9; Isaiah 66: 6-13**  
**June 16, 2013**  
**Rev. Dr. Charles Parker**

## **I Introduction**

After Jim Conley and Brena Gibson's wonderful wedding yesterday, I had the chance to have a reunion with a bunch of folks that I sang in a children's choir with 35 years ago. I haven't seen a lot of these folks in the better part of three decades, and the reunion was a wonderful, wonderful gift. And because we're a choir, we started off our time together singing, and we started off with this round that we used to sing that we should try sometime because we could do it as a congregation. It's from Psalm 103 and goes, "Like as a father pitieth his children, so the Lord has mercy." It goes on and on. It's a very lovely celebration of the nurturing role that fathers play in our lives, and it's a great place to start off reflecting on Father's Day, and both our celebration of fathers, our responsibility as fathers, and reflecting on God's role as father to us.

There's always a little bit of tension in that, however, when we celebrate fathers, in that we have not always done a good job as a church in how we balance our language about God as male and God as father with God as woman and mother. Sadly, we have a long history in our church of not treating women with equality. When I was in seminary, there was a very great and appropriate emphasis on bringing some intentionality to using language that was inclusive and avoiding the repeated talk of God as he and man and father. Both because it perpetuates the impression that we have historically inflicted on women, and it also becomes a barrier for those who have not had a positive experience with a father. It also perpetuates, even subconsciously, this

picture of God as the great white bearded old man in the sky that, as Kerm Towler noted in Bible study this week, is part of our iconography that we have inherited from the Temple of Zeus.

## **II. Learning about God**

But rather than avoiding talking about God as father, I want to suggest that a better way of handling this is the way our Scripture deals with it, which is to share with us this incredibly rich plethora of images about who God is. The images in Scripture of who God is and how God has engaged us are enormously rich. We just heard a couple of brief neighboring passages from the Prophet Isaiah, one of which has this very traditional picture of God as father and judge, and then right next to it is this wonderful image of God as a woman. If you listen carefully to the passage, it flows to actually three different very powerful images of womanhood, both God as giving birth to the nation of Israel as a mother, God as midwife drawing forth the child Israel, and then God as nursemaid nursing us at God's breast, nourishing us and caring for us as a mother.

The images of God as father and mother though, while multitude, are just a small percentage of the pictures of who God is in Scripture. We've got pictures of God as a potter molding us as clay, pictures of God as a weaver weaving together the disparate strands of our community into a united whole. We've got pictures of God as composer, creating a beautiful song of our lives. We've got pictures of God as a singer, singing that song. We've got pictures of God as the rock on which we can build. We've got pictures of God as the shepherd, as a builder, as a tent maker, as a gardener, God as wisdom, which is always personified as a woman, interestingly, God as a lion defending

us, God as a mother eagle bearing her children up on her wings as she teaches them to fly.

All of these are very compelling pictures of how we and our forbearers have experienced God through the ages, and the only way to get at those is through imagery. God is ultimately mystery. We can't know God absolutely. What we can do is use the experience of our lives, the experience of being a mother, having a father, of shaping clay, of weaving cloth. We use these images to get at this ultimate reality.

Ned Bachman was leading a class on Frederick Buechner in between services, and he used this wonderful quote from Buechner, who's a Presbyterian author and pastor, who says, "Since the reality that religion claims to deal with is beyond space and time, we cannot use normal space time language to describe it directly. We must fall back on the language of metaphor and image and resign ourselves to describing that reality, at best indirectly." So we've got to simultaneously use this language to describe who God is and understand that we're using it metaphorically because we can never capture all of who God is.

Some of us, as we take pleasure in our growing intellectual sophistication, start to find phrases to describe God that in theory get us away from some of the imagery, but I want to suggest even those are always rooted in images. So if you take a fairly theologically sophisticated idea like Paul Tillich talking about God as the ground of being. It's a wonderful phrase, but it's about ground, right? I mean ground as an image. Paul Tillich has used a visual image to help us understand who God is. So this language is inherent to who we are and how we talk about God, and of course Scripture is also very clear that the ultimate image of who God is we see in Jesus Christ. Paul

tells us in Colossians that Christ is the image of the invisible father through whom all things were made. And Jesus when he was talking to Philip on his last night in the upper room when Philip says, “How can we know what the father is like or what the father looks like?” Jesus, getting a little bit exasperated, says, “Have you been with me all this time and not realized that when you see me, you see the father?” Jesus is the image of who God is in God’s essence.

### **III. Learning about Ourselves**

So we learned all of these pieces about who God is through this rich tapestry of imagery in Scripture, but more than that we also learn through that imagery who we are. If we are created in the image of God and God is both father and mother, there is a piece of each of us that is father and mother, that we each contain those archetypes within us and need to learn how to embrace and celebrate them. But a lot of these images of who God is carried very powerful explicit messages about who we are.

If God is our mother then we are the child who God nourishes and cradles in God’s arms. What a wonderful image that is at places in our lives when we are feeling vulnerable and broken. When we are at places in our lives that feel a bit chaotic and when things are out of control, what a wonderful image to have of God as rock, as a solid foundation upon which we can build no matter how chaotic the things feel around us. When we are at places in our lives that we are feeling called to take a risk and are a little bit nervous and uncomfortable about that, what a wonderful image to have of God as the mother eagle nurturing her children and carrying them on her wings and giving them the opportunity to fly. What a wonderful gift it is when we are wrestling with a

negative self image and a negative self body image to think about God as the potter who has shaped us in exactly the way that God intends us to be. As we reflect on who we are as a community of faith, what a wonderful image to have of God as a weaver taking all of those disparate diverse strands and drawing them together into a unity. So that we start to figure out through these images who we are and who God has called and is calling us to be. All of that, of course, has to do with how we engage with God, how we enter into relationship with this One who loves us so fiercely and calls us so repeatedly.

I actually think that part of the reason that we like to intellectualize our language about God is because it's easier to keep God at a little bit of an arm's length. I'm not sure exactly how to enter into a relationship with the ground of being, right? I know what relationship with a dad looks like, or a brother or a sister, but I don't know what it means to enter into a relationship with the ground of being. I think that's a safer place for us because it keeps us from having to be vulnerable emotionally, and I think a lot of this imagery in Scripture is so powerful because it calls us to become vulnerable.

God isn't just referred to as father in Scripture, but Jesus uses the term *Abba* which is interesting in that it's an Aramaic word that is inserted into the Greek text of the New Testament. It was done with purpose, in other words. And "ab" or "av" is the Hebrew Aramaic root for father, and "ba" is a suffix that's a carative; it's a term of intimacy. So when you put that term of intimacy together with the word for father, you get what is essentially the equivalent of "daddy." So, you have Jesus referring to God not just as father, but as daddy in his prayer. And then you have Paul in both Romans

and Galatians also inviting us to refer to God as daddy, again, using that same Aramaic word in his letter, which is written in Greek.

#### **IV. Relationship**

I think that if we refer to God as daddy when we pray, there is a whole different feel to that, right? That's got a very different flavor to it, or mommy. How does that change what we're bringing to our encounter with God -- to use terms and images that are very intimate, that are very personal, that leave us in a more vulnerable place? I think that all this wondrous tapestry of images can be tools for us, can be ways for us to engage God in a different way.

So I want to invite you, as you move into this week, to maybe play with some of those images in your prayer time, to maybe speak to God as daddy or mommy or brother or lady wisdom, all these wonderful ways that God wants to call us out of our comfort zone and into a deeper, more meaningful relationship.

#### **V. Conclusion**

As we gather on Father's Day, let's embrace that image of who God is, as a caring and nurturing father that we as fathers can learn from as we seek to be faithful to that high calling and be able to sing together, "like as a father who pitieth his children so the Lord has mercy."

Amen.