

IN THE SHEEP PEN

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the 4th Sunday of Easter, May 11, 2003
Scripture: John 10:11-18

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

Jesus is the Good Shepherd, but I know next to nothing about shepherds. I know a whole lot more about mothers. As I read our Gospel lesson I discover that shepherds have some things in common with mothers. Mothers, like shepherds, lay down their lives for their children. Mothers, like shepherds, know their children. Mothers, like shepherds, will go to any length to protect and rescue their children from dangers.

I'm not the first person to see a relationship between Jesus and mothers. The Bible uses the image of a mother a number of times to tell us about God. For example, in Isaiah 46:3 the Lord says, "Listen to me, (you) who have been borne by me from your birth, carried from the womb; even to your old age I am he, even when you turn gray I will carry you. I have made (you), and I will bear, I will carry and will save." As a mother carries a baby in her womb for nine months, so God carries us and will continue to carry us no matter how old we are.

In Isaiah 49:15 the Lord asks, "Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you." Not everybody has a good mother. Some women may forget their children or show no compassion for them. But God is like a good mother who never forgets or fails to show compassion for his children.

In Isaiah 66:13, the Lord says, "As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you." Some may remember how your mother comforted you? Maybe they embraced you. They rocked you in her arms and sang to you. "I'll love you forever, I'll like you for always. As long as I'm living, my baby you'll be."

In the minor prophet Hosea (11:1-4), the Lord is a mother of prodigal children who've grown up and completely forgotten their mother. Like a forgotten mother, the Lord reminisces. "When Israel was a child, I loved him. The more I called; the more (he) went from me. Yet it was I who taught (him) to walk. I took him up in my arms; but he didn't not know that I healed him. I led them with cords of human kindness, with bands of love. I was to him like those who lift infants to their cheeks. I bent down to them and fed him." What mother hasn't called to a child who refused to listen? Or had a child that was ungrateful for the sacrifices she

If I were hanged on the highest hill,
I know whose love would follow me still,
If I were drowned in the deepest sea,
I know whose tears would come down to me,
If I were damned of body and soul,
I know whose prayers would make me whole,
Mother o' mine, O mother o' mine!

God's love for us in Jesus Christ follows us, sheds tears for us, and makes us whole by his death.

The great Scottish preacher, Alexander Maclaren, once asked, "Did any of you parents ever hear your child wake from sleep with some panic and shriek 'mother' through the darkness? And, depend upon it, that the soul which cries aloud to God, 'the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,' though it have 'no language but a cry, will never call in vain.'"

Let us pray: Lord Jesus, our Kind and Gracious Mother, you have laid down your life for your children. You know us all by name. You go searching for your lost children and have promised that not one of us will be lost. But we have made ourselves dirty and will never be clean without your grace. Lord Jesus, our Kind and Gracious Mother, have mercy on us, forgive us, feed us with your Body and Blood until we eat and drink with you in your consummated kingdom. Amen.

pains of labor, you give us a new birth.” Imagine what that must have met to a woman living in the Middle Ages?

In another meditation Anselm, again, compares Christ’s suffering on the cross to a woman. He says, “It is by your death that (we) have been born (again), for if you had not been in labor, you could not have borne death; and if you had not died, you would not have brought forth. For, longing to bear sons (and daughters) into (eternal) life, you tasted death, and by dying you begot them.” Then Saint Anselm addresses his own soul. “And you, my soul, dead in yourself, run under the wings of Jesus your mother.” Long before the rise of the modern feminist movement, some medieval Christians had no qualms about using the metaphor of a mother to tell us about the wonderful love of Jesus.

Julian of Norwich, who lived about 300 years after Anselm, was another writer who spoke of Jesus as a mother. She lived in the 14th century, about 50 years after the death of William Wallace of Braveheart fame. Julian was the first writer in English who can be certainly identified as a woman. She writes, “Our Savior is our true mother in whom we are eternally born and by whom we shall always be enclosed.” With Anselm, Julian understood that without Jesus as our mother we could never have been born again.

In another meditation she says that Jesus is like a mother breast-feeding her children. As a mother feeds us with her milk, Christ feeds us with his body and blood. More dramatically she writes, “Often when our sin is shown to us, we are so terrified and so very ashamed that we hardly know where to go. But then our kind Mother does not want us to run from him, there is nothing he wants less. But he wants us to behave like a child; for when it is hurt or frightened it runs to its mother for help as fast as it can; and Christ wants us to do the same, like a humble child, saying, ‘My kind Mother, my gracious Mother, my dearest Mother, take pity on me. I have made myself dirty and I will never be clean without your grace.’” Remember, she’s referring to Christ, not the Virgin Mary, as our Kind Mother.

So throughout the centuries, men and women have seen God in Christ not only as a father or a good shepherd, but also as a kind mother. Perhaps nobody expressed this more beautifully than Rudyard Kipling. In the introduction of his novel, The Light that Failed he writes a poem about his mother.

made? God's heart aches for his prodigal children like a mother whose children don't remember her on Mother's Day.

The New Testament uses the metaphor of a mother to refer to Jesus. Jesus wept over Jerusalem like a mother weeping for her disobedient children. "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!" Mothers – have you ever watched your sons or daughters – whatever their ages - infants, teenagers, young adults or even older adults - and wept for them. "Why do you keep making bad choices?" Like a mother whose heart aches for her prodigal children, the Risen Christ weeps over us when we stray and disobey.

The Bible isn't the only book that speaks of God's motherly love for us. When I was at Oxford University two summers ago I took a course on medieval spirituality taught by an Anglican nun – a wonderful woman who was not only a scholar but also a devout, loving Christian without any pretensions. She lectured on two medieval Christians, Saint Anselm and Julian of Norwich, both of whom used powerful maternal images for God.

Saint Anselm was born in Italy late in the 11th century nearly a thousand years ago. Put that in an historical context. Think back to your history classes in high school. What significant historical event took place in 1066? The Battle of Hastings, when the Normans invaded England and conquered King Harold, the last Anglo-Saxon king. Anselm was about 33 years old at the time. On a visit to England in 1093 he was compelled by King William Rufus to become the Archbishop of Canterbury. He was probably the most learned man in England at the time. He wrote books still studied in seminaries and colleges today.

One was a book of meditations for a woman whose spiritual needs, until then, were largely overlooked. In one of Anselm's meditations he addresses Jesus. "And you, Jesus, are you not also a mother? Are you not the mother who, like a hen, gathers her chickens under her wings? Truly, Lord, you are a mother; for both they who are in labor and they who are brought forth are accepted by you." Anselm not only alludes to Matthew 23, he also refers to what Jesus said in John Chapter 3, how we must be born again. "Jesus, like a mother in the