

God's Motherly Embrace

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It's turning out to be kind of a weird Lent for me. Usually, I get really into Lent: fasting, alms, the whole nine yards. It turns out that, unlike my twin sister, I *don't* get hangry, so fasting is like a little bit of a superpower for me. One year I went to morning prayer with a Catholic church at least three times a week. In campus ministry, we even did a daily office. We did morning prayer, midday prayer, and evening prayer, five days a week for the entirety of Lent.

But this year I am struggling a little bit. Maybe it's the fact that I just moved across the country and started a new job, so maybe I'm stressed enough and don't need to add anything else to that? Maybe it's because, since moving here, it feels like I've gone forward in time. Not just an hour, but like a couple months to Easter already because I managed to escape two months of still winter and the endless days of dirty slush. Maybe it's the fact that since the pandemic really got going in Lent of 2020, it feels like we've kind of been stuck in Lent the whole time and never really got to Easter. Maybe I'm kind of exhausted from everything that's going on in the world, especially the war in Ukraine and the tiny—but not *insignificant*—threat of nuclear war alongside ongoing climate change, injustice, and political strife. Whatever it is, like the kids say these days, *I just can't even*. Is there anyone else with me, anyone else? So...yeah, we can't even.

So I was so relieved in our gospel today to hear about a new spiritual practice that I might actually be able to engage in. I don't know, maybe you heard it, too. I think it's called Snuggling With God. How have I never heard about this until today? In our gospel reading, Jesus is making his way through the countryside. He is teaching and healing, also gathering followers and enemies along the way. One group of enemies is the religious leaders who often clash with Jesus, as he ignores religious customs, subverts their authority, and accuses them of hypocrisy. Another enemy is Herod Antipas, the son of Herod who tried to kill Jesus when he was a baby. Herod's really worried that Jesus' incendiary rhetoric will bring down the might of Rome on all of them.

Or he could also just be really mad about what Jesus just said right before this reading. That nice little reading we hear about the first being last and the last being first, which is not great news for those who are first. Either way, Jesus hears this news from the religious leaders that Herod wants to kill him, and he's pretty unconcerned. *Here's my schedule*, he says. After all, he is planning on death in Jerusalem, as he slowly makes his way to the cross. He knows he won't be killed out in the countryside. And he draws on the tradition of the prophets who have come before him, many of whom who have suffered and died in the holy city.

But there is something that does concern Jesus. Jesus says, *How often have I desired to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her brood under her wings*. And it is so amazing—here in the middle of Women's History Month, just after International Women's Day—we get this lovely nurturing image of the

Feminine Divine. And we don't get to hear very often from the Bible Mother Hen God, the one who desires most of all to gather all of her children together. God, who knows what we have done and what we have left undone, and still invites us to snuggle and close. Jesus lays out God's most fervent wish, which is to draw all creation together into one close embrace.

Jesus continues: *How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings and you were not willing.* Not willing? What part of snuggling close to God does not appeal to them? Well, I can't speak for the people of Jerusalem, but I can speak for me. And I can think of a couple of things that have prevented me from snuggling close to God.

I think of even just last Sunday, just after worship service when I was already thinking that this is the direction I was going to go with my sermon. I found myself pushing around all of the heavy furniture in my office as I rearranged it, and I thought for a second, *You know, literally everyone in the office has offered to help you. You don't have to do this alone.* But I was like, *but I can do it! I don't need any help.*

It's hard in our culture when we know that the best thing you can be is an individual, and self-sufficiency is prized so much. It can be hard to lay back and let God do what God is going to do. To accept that grace and those gifts when we want to do it ourselves, when we can earn our own salvation. I think, too: if God's gathering all creation, then that means even people I don't like. That means people who aren't nearly as deserving as I am,

people that I have to come into close contact with. I think, too, there's that fear deep down of *does God really want me?*

I think of a few years back when my sister and I were touring the USS Constitution, this battleship out on the east coast. It was very hot, and she came close and she leaned her head on my shoulder. It was hot! There was no part of me that was like, *we can cuddle right now*. I was like *I am dying down here!* So she just leaned, and I took a step back. It turned out that she was fainting, and she was hoping I would hold her up. And she just fell all the way down. And I think sometimes I'm a little worried that if I rely on God, that maybe God will do the same thing. But, of course, God, doesn't. God continues to invite us to snuggle close. God says, *I'm here*. God will not let us fall.

We hear about Abraham, too; not Abraham yet, but Abram. He is unsure of what the future will look like and knows that, by his own work, he cannot possibly bring about the promises that God has made because he's getting up in age. And he said, *All of my things are going to somebody else! You've promised me so much, but I don't see it*. And I imagine God taking Abraham outside and saying, *Come here*. Putting an arm around his shoulders and pointing up to the heavens and saying, *Look at the stars. Your descendants will be that like that*. And I imagine Abraham snuggling close as Abraham believes, and God credits it to him as righteousness.

But then, of course, immediately after (in case, we thought, *well, Abram's better than me. Abraham might be able to do it. And I can't.*) God says, *Here's another promise for you*, and Abraham says, *How will I know? How will you prove it to me?* Abraham

just needs a little practice, and I think sometimes we just need a little practice, too.

So we're going to practice just a little bit today. I would invite you to just close your eyes, take a few deep breaths, settle back a little, and relax into these motherly wings. Feel the warmth of promises made and promises kept, forgiveness freely given, of endless reconciliation. Listen for God as she calls to us, today and always.

Anytime that we think that our relationship to God is up to us, like toddlers saying, *I can do it myself!* When we are convinced that the only path to righteousness is more hard work. When we're sure that the way to holiness is our own effort, God smiles at us and says *Come here*.

When we'd rather go it alone than be part of a community. When we're not quite sure about this whole body of Christ thing. When we'd like to be in charge of who else gets to be in on this hug, God shakes her head and sighs and says, *Come here*.

When we feel unwanted and unworthy. When we're not quite sure why anyone would want to draw us close, much less the divine. When shame and doubt try to tell us that we're undeserving of God's love. Then—**most of all**—God continues to beckon: *Come here*. Her arms are always open, her embrace is big enough for everyone, and she'll keep calling until you're safely snuggled in. Hear her voice today.

Amen.

