

May 12, 2019
Rev. Jane Florence
Luke 2: 34-38
“Blessings and Sorrows”



Today is known as Mother’s Day. It is a secular holiday, meaning that it is not a church holiday like Christmas or Easter or Pentecost. It is a Hallmark Holiday whose founder was upset at its commercialization. Even though it is not a church holy day, some churches recognize Mothers on this day.

I attended a church in my pew dwelling days where mothers were recognized on Mother’s Day Sunday during the worship service. The newest mom would get a awww as she stood with her newborn. Then the mom with the most children was to be recognized. As the pastor tried to determine who that would be all the moms with more than 6 children were asked to stand. Then as the pastor called out higher numbers to remain standing, the number of moms remaining upright decreased. Finally when the preacher asked those women with more than twelve children to stay standing, all but one lady sat down. He asked her how many children she had, she said “27 and I’m not done yet.” A gasp and a giggle rippled across the church. Guests were astounded, but those who knew her understood. She had been foster mom to more than two dozen children in need; she was their mom. They were all her children. Hers was the only safe home they had known. Then, the oldest mom alive in our midst would be recognized, I’m not sure how she felt about that one. That was the tradition in that church on Mother’s Day. I did note that they did not follow the same process on Father’s day which I thought was curious. Honestly, I found the whole thing a bit uncomfortable.

Mother’s Day is a delicate day. Some sons and daughters here are taking a loving mom (and maybe grandma) to lunch after church today. Some sons and daughters are grieving the absence of their loving mom this year. Some sons and daughter’s grief is in the form of anger. Those who never knew the quintessential Mother’s love can feel cheated. Some women are joyful for their delightful gift of motherhood. Some are struggling with the weight of it. Some women are grieving the children they never had or the one they lost that would have called them “Mother” today. Some mothers are grieving the prodigal child who is wandering painfully in this world, and they feeling a motoring helplessness.

Mother’s Day is a joy, and a sorrow, and regrets, and delights. So for most of the last twenty years in ministry, I’ve thought it best just to avoid the topic on a day which can bring a flood of emotions colliding. However in recent years, I’ve thought maybe it’s best just go ahead and name it. Name that there are those here in gratitude and those here in mourning. This is a space and community to hold and share the sorrows and joys of life. Our scripture tells us it is so.

Imagine yourself a new mother - in the first century - with an unexpected teenage pregnancy - away from home - without the women you know near to you to guide you through the process of childbirth- without all the books or internet and wisdom of google to answer your questions or offer quick medical reference - without a long relationship with your baby's father - imagine yourself in that situation giving birth. It is almost impossible for us 21 century North Americans to imagine. But the author of Luke's Gospel does just that. Imagine. That's the scenario that Luke creates in his birth narrative.

According to Luke's story, Mary, an un-wed teenager, gives birth while complying with a royal taxation registration, meaning she and her fiancée are in the small village of Bethlehem when she delivers not home near loved ones and support community. Evidently Mary and Joseph return home to Nazareth in the days following the birth. However, by the end of the birth week, they travel again to the nation's capital city of Jerusalem so that the baby can be properly presented at the Temple.

That would have been a lot of traveling almost impossible one might say to traverse the 100 miles in a week on foot. Having just given birth to her first child, Mary has experienced the fear, pain and joy of childbirth, and the fear, pain and joy of too many days on the road with a newborn. But the laws of Moses dictate the boy child is to be presented at the Temple on the eighth day of life for the ritual of purification and circumcision. Mary would have been emotionally and physically exhausted.

In Luke's story, Mary and Joseph enter the temple, but before they conclude all that was required of them a man that they do not know approaches. The old man reaches his brown wrinkled hands out to hold the baby. By that time, maybe Mary is so tired, she will hand the baby over to anyone who will give her a bit of respite, or maybe she clutched her newborn a bit tighter unsure of this withered stranger's intent. Simeon takes Jesus into his arms, praised God and blessed the child. Then he turns to Mary and says, "This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel— and a sword will pierce your own soul too."

That is not a very comforting thing to say to a new mother. With words of blessings and sorrows dripping upon her, Mary receives her infant back to her arms. This child will cause great joy and soul-piercing sorrow. This child is a great blessing and your laboring pains are not done. In some sense, it is the truth for us all.

In the early 90s the now modern classic Christmas song, "Mary Did You Know?" launched. It is a pretty song. I like the tune. It is a rhetorical question which reviews the beautiful life of Jesus. My first thought when I heard the song was, of course, not assessment of its musicality, but resistance to it theologically. I yelled at the radio, "she did not know!" Of course, she did not know. We know the end of the story. We know the end of her baby's life 33 years after his birth. We know, but how cruel would that have been for her to know just how tragically her son's life would end - executed as a criminal by the state, and a life misunderstood by so many. To know exactly how her soul would be pierced alongside his side - to know that she would witness his torture. No, she didn't

know. How could she have watched him learn to walk knowing where those feet would take him, and play in the dirt knowing he would face his opponents one day drawing in the dirt, and laugh with his teenage friends? If she knew every day of his life how it would end, how could she have lived? God cares for us too much to show us all our life's sorrows at birth, or all the sorrows that await our children throughout their entire life. To witness in one moment all the pain for any that we love would be too much.

Mothering God births us into being and nurses us in wisdom and calls us into family to love and care for each other every step along the way, not knowing the joys or the sorrows of tomorrow or next year. Given no certainties to the next decades, but given the gift of life today.

Our God is relational, meaning we are all family. We are all mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers with and for one another in our blessed days and our sorrowful ones. In our adventures and our securities. We all have aspects of what our culture labels as feminine and those considered masculine- those attributes considered motherly and those considered fatherly. Hebrew scriptures give us a picture of Mothering God, who leads, teaches, cares, nurtures, feeds, heals, guides her children. It is a Mothering God image that transcends a biological experience or a gender exclusions.

In that sense, Mother moves from a singular - person, place or thing- defined by biological anatomy or process; it becomes a plural - the activity of raising up one another, the process of nurturing- being caring, protective, and kind as we relate to all others and all Divine creation. Our baptismal waters of life, gathers us in wonder and mystery into community which shares in shaping and comforting and celebrating all our days. God's Spirit guides us all to live a holy mothering love in mystical union of God's grace.