

Written Service Sunday March 10th
A service of worship for use at home
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Methodist Circuit
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Mothering Sunday

Let's begin by singing / reading a familiar song together.

Now thank we all our God,
With heart and hands and voices,
Who wondrous things has done,
In whom this world rejoices;
Who from our mothers' arms
Has blessed us on our way
With countless gifts of love,
And still is ours today.

O may this bounteous God
Through all our life be near us,
With ever joyful hearts
And blessed peace to cheer us;
And keep us in His grace,
And guide us when perplexed;
And free us from all ills,
In this world and the next!

All praise and thanks to God
The Father now be given;
The Son and Him who reigns
With Them in highest Heaven;
The one eternal God,
Whom earth and Heaven adore;
For thus it was, is now,
And shall be evermore.

Let's pray using Psalm 127

The Lord shall keep watch over you
The Lord shall keep watch over you
Unless the Lord builds the house,
those who build it labour in vain.
Unless the Lord keeps the city,
the guard keeps watch in vain.
The Lord shall keep watch over you

It is in vain that you hasten to rise up early and go so late to rest,
eating the bread of toil,
for he gives his beloved sleep.
Children are a heritage from the Lord
and the fruit of the womb is his gift.
The Lord shall keep watch over you

Like arrows in the hand of a warrior, so are the children of one's youth.
Happy are those who have their quiver full of them:
they shall not be put to shame
when they dispute with their enemies in the gate.
The Lord shall keep watch over you

Reading Luke 13:31-35 Jesus' Sorrow for Jerusalem

³¹ At that time some Pharisees came to Jesus and said to him, "Leave this place and go somewhere else. Herod wants to kill you."

³² He replied, "Go tell that fox, 'I will keep on driving out demons and healing people today and tomorrow, and on the third day I will reach my goal.' ³³ In any case, I must press on today and tomorrow and the next day—for surely no prophet can die outside Jerusalem!"

³⁴ "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing. ³⁵ Look, your house is left to you desolate. I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.' [b]"

Today's message

There is a certain line of thought which suggests that the bible is a book written by men, from the view point of men, about men, for men. As a result the bible can come across as extremely male, extremely patriarchal. Even God can come across as being male, something perhaps not helped by the fact that God is often referred to as "Father" an obviously male identity.

And so I cannot think of a more appropriate weekend, one that celebrates both International Women's day and Mothering Sunday to shift our focus elsewhere for a little while

Because the concept and importance of being a woman, being a mother runs like a thread throughout the bible, if only we look carefully. To be a mother is the Bible's most honoured woman, and great stress is laid upon the importance of being a mother. The word "mother" or "mothers" appears in the Bible almost 300 times. The phrase "And his mother was . . ." appears 20 times in II Kings and II Chronicles, a fact that is of interest to those who might think biblical genealogies are only concerned with the male side of the family.

Stop for a moment to think how much poorer our faith history would be without the various mothers we encounter in scripture, the Matriachs, each one showing a range of characteristics, qualities and experiences....some good, some perhaps more mixed

- Eve Sarah Rebekah Rachel,
- Jochebed was the mother of Aaron, Moses and Miriam.
- Hannah
- Mary, mother of Jesus and her cousin Elizabeth
- Salome, mother of the disciples James and John,
- Lois, and thy mother Eunice;

And as Methodist many scholars have concluded that you cannot really understand John and Charles Wesley, founder and chief hymn writer of the Methodist movement, unless you realise and understand the importance of their mother Susanna Wesley.

I have spoken at the beginning that we often refer to God as Father, give God male characteristics but there are many instances in scripture where nature and character of God are distinctly feminine, distinctly those of a mother.

But there is perhaps no more powerful an image of God as a mother than in our reading from Luke, one echoed in Matthew when Jesus stands overlooking Jerusalem and exclaims

"Jerusalem, Jerusalem, how often I have desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing."

It is a powerful image created by Jesus, one of the most overtly feminine, motherly references to God in all of scripture: the hen who gathers her reluctant brood under her wings.

Jesus' metaphor of himself as a hen gathering his chicks under his wings is especially poignant when laid beside his characterization of Herod as a fox. A fox in the hen house. He is the one who creates mistrust and fear, betrayal and confusion.

The chicks are reluctant to come under the hen's wings, even though they know that is the place they should shelter. Perhaps they think that she is vulnerable and soft. And of course she is. How more appealing in contrast, is the option to perhaps skirt behind the fox whose obvious strength and power overwhelm the hen, even on her best day.

Why it is that Jesus chooses a hen as an image of his protective care, and not a creature more powerful like the mighty eagle of Exodus or the lion of Judah. Either of those images would be a better option and yet Jesus chooses the image of a hen. Jesus it seems will not cast himself as the king of the jungle in this or any other story.

Remembering Jesus' habit of turning things upside down, so that children and peasants wind up on top while kings and scholars land on the bottom it isn't perhaps not so unusual.

Jesus is always challenging our expectations of how things should turn out by giving prizes to losers and paying the last first.

So of course he chooses a chicken, which is about as far from a fox as you can get.

That way the options become very clear: you can live by licking your chops and preying on others or you can risk death by protecting the chicks.

The image of God as hen is one that lays bare God's vulnerability. When you are the mother hen, all you can do is open your wings wide and gather as many as you can, but you cannot make the chicks come in regardless of how open the invitation.

The mother hen who stands between the chicks and those who mean to do them harm has no fangs, no claws, no rippling muscles.

All she has is her willingness to shield her babies with her own body. To protect them with her own life.

If the fox wants them, he will have to kill her first which, as it turns out, he does

He comes upon secretly her one night in the garden while all the babies are asleep. When her cries wakens them, they scatter. She dies the next day in a place where both foxes and chickens can see her – wings spread wide, breast exposed – without a single chick beneath her feathers. It breaks her heart, but it does not change a thing.

If you mean what you say, then this is how you stand, this is what you are prepared to do, these are the lengths you will go to try and save those you love.

Many would argue however that God is not a person, God is neither male nor female. God is beyond and outside of gender. And it is only the fact that the writers of the books in the bible have used male imagery for centuries that has given us the image of God as a male. Perhaps a better image is to image God as a parent

To be a parent - to be a mother or a father - is to be made vulnerable, to be open to experiencing pain. Constantly making room for another, making sacrifices to put the care and well being of another first and foremost. To live with the danger of being rejected over and over again. And yet to constantly offer a welcome with open arms. To love even to the point of laying down their life not just for family and friend but for stranger too

So how does that work for us, for the church...how can we ensure we offer the appropriate protection to and for those who are vulnerable.

- By challenging injustice and inequality
- By ensuring that safeguarding is at the heart of all we do.
- By seeking to be an inclusive church.
- By having policies and practices in place that do not discriminate and exclude.
- By standing for justice and solidarity with the oppressed.

Hopefully, those things sound familiar because they are at the heart of what the Methodist Church seeks to be.

So next time you see some a mother hen and her chicks, just think about just who it is you and I need to be grateful too, for laying down his life, in order to protect and save us from the ultimate sly fox. And who it might be that we are called to put our bodies on the line in order to protect them in obedience to the one who laid down his life for us

Let's sing / read together again

God is Love, let heav'n adore him;
God is Love, let earth rejoice;
Let creation sing before him
And exalt him with one voice.
God who laid the earth's foundation,
God who spread the heav'ns above,
God who breathes through all creation:
God is Love, eternal Love.

God is Love; and love enfolds us,
All the world in one embrace:
With unfailing grasp God hold us,
Ev'ry child of ev'ry race.
And when human hearts are breaking
Under sorrow's iron rod,
Then we find that self-same aching
Deep within the heart of God.

God is Love; and though with blindness
Sin afflicts all human life,
God's eternal loving kindness
Guides us through our earthly strife.
Sin and death and hell shall never
O'er us final triumph gain;
God is Love, so Love for ever
O'er the universe must reign.

Let's come together in prayer on this Mothering Sunday

Loving God we thanks you for the Mother Church.... here to offer shelter, here to protect, here to nurture, here to defend

We pray for those who have been our mothers...and for those who have stood in to mother us.

We pray for those who have had difficult relationships with their own mothers

We pray for those who have not been able to be mothers and for all those who work in the area of infertility

We pray for those for who motherhood was a burden rather than a blessing.

We join our voices together to say the word's f the Lord's prayer

Let's finish together in singing a new song but to the familiar tune of 'The Churches one foundation'

O God of truth and glory,
in listening to your Word,
We sometimes miss the story of voices
seldom heard.
Forgive our poor attention.
to women who were there
To those we hardly mention
in scripture, hymn or prayer.

For Eve was Adam's partner,
and Noah had a wife.
And Sarah laughed in wonder.
at how you changed her life.
Rebekah, strong and forceful,
knew just what she would do.
And Rachel was resourceful,
and Dinah mattered, too.

Young Miriam saved her brother.
she found the boy a home.
And so the Pharaoh's daughter
raised Moses as her own.
You called on countless women
to work and serve and pray.
Lord, may we, too, be listening
when you call us today.

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The Blessing

Go from this moment and this place into all the moments and places that God is calling you to go....to be God's witness, God's light and in God's service