

Reflection for July 3, 2022 - It's Astonishing Based On Isaiah 66:8b-14

Do you have your personal favourite images of God? What have you heard or read, either from the bible or otherwise, that pull you into a sense of ease, comfort, protection, and harmony? God as a mother enfolding her chicks is one of mine. Another is being held high on the wings or eagles, above the clouds, carried away from my concerns. "I can fly higher than an eagle, you are the wind beneath my wings," words from Bette Midler's smash hit in the 80's resonates with many folks, recognizing God's steadfast love and support in times of discouragement. I like Josh Groban's "You Raise Me Up," finding the image of me standing on God's shoulders raising me up to more than I can be," incredibly grounding and hopeful.

There are so many images, the breath of wind, the warm sun on the face, a feeling of another hand in yours, a sense of quiet out on a lake in a small boat, the serenity of being in your garden. All bring us to that place of confident reassurance that something beyond our knowing and imagining is with us. We know as we say that we are never alone.

I expect you would all agree that God the Father or Mother image is right up there at the top of your list. The strength and commitment of a father; solid, protecting, providing, and encouraging. The unwavering love of a mother; the nurturer, caregiver, wound-healer, confider. God our parent, from whom we have our "spirit-birth" is all of those things and more, much more.

And so, it is not surprising in the least that a prophet of long ago would call upon the parental love of God in desperate times, in images we can relate to.

At this time in its tumultuous history the Judean exiles are returning to Jerusalem (also known as Zion) from Babylon. It has, as we can only imagine, been a very difficult homecoming. The rebuilding of the temple was delayed, and the city's walls have remained in ruins for nearly a century. Among shattered dreams and hopelessness God, as a kind of midwife promises renewal.

***as soon as Zion was in labor
she delivered her children.***

***⁹ Shall I open the womb and not deliver?
says the LORD;
shall I, the one who delivers, shut the womb?
says your God.***

There is endless opportunity for rebirth, rebirth of dreams yet unrealized, rebirth of real hope for renewal, rebirth of a people and a nation in the Holy. I will open the womb to a new beginning says God, as a child will be born from the womb of its mother.

God the mother emerges as the protector of Jerusalem, "As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you." It is provided in the image of a mother breast-feeding and infant and bouncing them on her knee. Life-giving evocative metaphors of a mothering God providing sustenance to a wounded and battered people come forth. The people are offered healing. Eventually Jerusalem herself will become like a mother once again where all her children can be nursed back into community that will prosper. "**The wealth of the nations**" will be "**like an overflowing stream.**"

Those are nice words, comforting words, encouraging words, words of great wisdom. But can we see these words in our reality, can we believe in the miracle of God's influence in our lives, in the world here and now?

Israel and the city of Jerusalem are to this day embattled with conflict and uncertainty. The historical Palestinian rightful claims to land and resources are being threatened more each day in the age-old conflict of Arab and Jew. We wonder where the new life promised from God's womb has gone.

We might contemplate a similar conflict in present day Ukraine and wonder the same thing. Where is the possibility of peace and any semblance of a return to normal? How would a refugee

family or a resident of a city crumbling around them interpret the words, **“As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you.”** There are unfortunately any number of regions in the world where we could pose the same question. How is it possible for God to break in as a parent offering the kind of reassurance only a mother or father can? Is the vision of being held lovingly and bounced on God’s knee a reality, or a ridiculous and unrealistic human dream?

A few days ago, I was reading one of Father Richard Rohr’s daily meditations and he offered some thoughts on transformation through biblical literature. He quoted the Romanian French playwright **Eugène Ionesco** *who wrote:*

“Explanation separates us from astonishment . . .”. I do not want my teachings and my too many words to separate anyone from astonishment or to act as a substitute for inner experience. The marvelous anthology of books and letters called the Bible is all for the sake of astonishment—not “proof” or certainty! It’s for divine transformation (theosis), not intellectual or “small-self” coziness. Ideas are not a problem—but a true inner experience is something else. It changes us, The biblical revelation invites us into a genuinely new experience. The trouble is that we have made the Bible into a bunch of ideas—about which we can be right or wrong—rather than an invitation to a new set of eyes.”¹

Hmmm, I wondered, “be prepared to be astonished.” When you read scripture be prepared to be surprised, amazed, astounded and even dumbfounded. And look through new eyes.

“Do you mean to tell me unthinkable and unimaginable change is possible? Those things we call miracles are not just for children’s storybooks. Yes, says Ionesco, and I believe him. That is providing we are able to discern biblical literature with a new set of eyes. Those eyes recognize possibility, they are not fixated on fact. We move from “what to believe,” to “how to believe.”

The possibility for transformation, the possibility for God to birth a new thing is entirely within human grasp, if we avoid biblical story as absolute, something to be proved or disproved, something which is either right or wrong. That is not how the spirit flourishes. That unfortunately is one of the reasons many today turn away from church or even faith. They read or hear biblical story, dismiss it as poppycock and that is that. God never has a chance to break in. Those of us that try to live “in the word,” are depicted as foolish and naïve. Are we? I don’t think so.

It is impossible to imagine how a returning Jew would hear Isaiah’s words, **“As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you?”** Perhaps we might be able to imagine this as a Ukrainian.

Every day there are more images of devastation, injury and death. Entire villages are in ruins, we have seen the videos. Homes, apartments, schools, care facilities and even hospitals have been bombed. Hundreds of thousands have fled creating even more refugees who need a safe place to be. Innocent men, women and children have died. A peaceful nation has been rocked to its core. How might a Ukrainian citizen see God **“as a mother comforting her child,”** with all the security, hope and love that conveys?

I expect that is impossible if they used their “regular lenses,” the eyes that they and we have been accustomed to viewing the world from. Those are the eyes that see cruelty, aggression, and corruption as “normal.” We need a vision that seeks out ways for new possibility, new reality. God is not interested in normal, especially if normal is bad news.

God can come in astonishing ways. God came to the returning exiles because they believed in the opportunity for a restart, they had faith Yahweh’s love was real and would support them. And so, they survived and thrived.

God will cause there to be a rebirth in the shattered country and people of the Ukraine. By extending open arms to those fleeing, providing food, clothing, and necessities to those in need and

¹ Richard Rohr, daily meditation from June 29, 2022

reminding them they are not abandoned in their journey, compassion will flow. Political influence on the international stage will help spark some hope for an end to living a nightmare.

Our times change and history repeats itself all too often in the image of cruelty, and injustice. But we can, with Holy Love as our mantle coax the seemingly unimaginable into being. Prosperity can run like a river again and we can be nursed and carried by a god that lives in and through each one of us. We will be astonished at what God can do.

God flying us high on Eagles Wings, God holding us on Holy Shoulders, God comforting us in quiet prayer of in the company of a friend, God being a part of our living. It is Astonishing.

Thanks for listening this morning, Amen