

Faith Mennonite Church
August 5, 2010
Joetta Schlabach

God births and we care for the earth
Genesis 1 & 2

A bit of introduction: Last spring someone called my attention to a children's book, *Heart Talks with Mother God*. It contains a set of meditations for children that explore various images of God as a caring mother. Our worship commission decided that we would like to use some of these images in our worship during the month of September.

The language we use for God and the images that it forms in our minds is a complex topic. The language of the Bible uses predominantly masculine images for God – ruler, king, shepherd, father and lord—which is not surprising given the time and context of patriarchal cultures in which the Bible was written. Yet, when we read carefully, we find a broader range of images. In the Old Testament God's love is described as that of a woman in labor, and God's care is described as that of a mother bird hovering over her nesting young. God is Spirit-breath; God is wisdom. The gospel writers in the New Testament use a variety of images, many of which are gender neutral, to describe Jesus and the kingdom—bread, the way, living water, seeds, yeast, a pearl, a mother hen.

All language about God, all images of God, are human attempts to describe the indescribable. As Psalm 8 says: “how majestic is your name in all the earth.” Yet our language and our images, whatever their short-comings, are essential precisely because we believe in a God who has created us for relationship—relationship with each other and with God. It's pretty difficult to imagine a meaningful relationship in which we do not use names in our conversation, whether formal or familiar. The very story of creation in the first two chapters of Genesis, which we will move to in a moment, makes naming a central part of the story.

We err, of course, when the names and images we use for God, narrow rather than enlarge our understanding of God. We err when we trap God in a name rather than letting God's magnificence and grandeur redefine our concept of a word or name. We err when we attach a notion of physical gender to God, be it male or female. Calling God father does not make God male; calling God mother does not make God female.

When the early church said “Jesus is Lord,” which was the equivalent of saying “Jesus is Caesar” they were not likening Jesus to a Roman Caesar, rather they were saying that Jesus gave them a new understanding of what it meant to rule, with love not force, as a servant not a master. It was this understanding that they chose to commit their lives to, no matter what the cost.

At various stages of development our young children may latch on to a particular, concrete image of God. They may not be able to transcend notions of physical gender as they think of God as mother and father. But our children are bright and have lively imaginations. They also have wonderful models in this church and in their families that demonstrate the tender care of a father and of Father God and the protective, strong love of a mother and Mother God. As they hear and learn many names for God, in church and at home, they will come to know the loving mystery. I hope that over the next four weeks we will all be inspired to spend time with these images in our own conversations with God, and our conversations with one another.

The story of creation in Genesis is very much a birthing story. Like our human experiences with birth, it is a story of relationship and love. Like parents who welcome a new child and

immediately see—even when it is still discolored and coated in birthing fluids—that it is the most beautiful thing they’ve ever laid eyes on, Creator God in the first chapter of Genesis says over and over “It is good!”

Part of the relational nature of the human birthing process is that parents begin an immediate journey of relinquishing control of this new life. Babies have a way of redirecting the energy and schedules of a household. Personalities become evident very early. Parents (and aunts, uncles and grandparents) cuddle, nurture, protect, and guide, all with the express purpose of helping this helpless creature to grow and mature so that one day he or she will leave home, set out on their own and make their way in the world.

The creation account records a similar process. In the Genesis story, God begins creating, sets time in motion, separates the water, land and sky, and brings creatures to life. But soon creation itself takes a role in the process. In the first chapter of Genesis God gives names to the various parts of creation and in the second chapter God delegates this naming responsibility to the human, inviting the human to give names to the creatures that will be his companions. And indeed, when the human is lonely, God allows the human to choose that which brings true companionship. First God brings an animal parade, but the human loneliness does not subside. Then God creates another human, similar yet different, a partner and companion who will support and share in the task of caring for the created order. This, the human agrees, is truly satisfying.

This growing responsibility culminates in God giving humans the responsibility to care for creation, to have dominion over the animals and to till and keep the garden of the earth. This is such an awesome calling and one that humans have sadly done a very poor job of fulfilling. Somewhere along the line humans began to distort this responsibility into a privilege to exploit and conquer the land, resources and animals, rather than to harmoniously respect and care for them. (Part of this fallen story is also lived out in the way people have dealt with each other.)

Today our mother earth, birthed so long ago by Mother God, is like an elder on life-support, gasping for breath. Environmental activist and writer Bill McKibben likens the state of the earth to a person who has been diagnosed with almost complete blockage in all of their heart arteries. There is no time for gradual life-style change to avoid a catastrophe; the doctor just hopes that the person doesn’t collapse and die before making it to bypass surgery.

This is *our* mother, *our* home, that we’re talking about. And this is precisely why we have a Car Sabbath twice a year. Just as our weekly Sabbath calls us to rest and to cease productive activity, to focus on our Creator and our new life in Christ, our Car Sabbath serves both as a celebration of the many ways we are all involved in working to decrease our energy consumption and as a reminder that there *is* an urgency; extreme measures *are* needed. We can be assured that the same spirit that breathed over the chaos at the birthing of the world, the same spirit that ushered in the new community that Jesus proclaimed, this Spirit still blows, still leads us into truth and lovingly calls us to be part of a New Creation.

Let us give thanks to Mother God for birthing this wonderful world and its inhabitants. Let us joyfully join in the ongoing work of creation by laboring to care for our mother earth.