**Sunday May 9, 2021**

**Mother’s Day**

**“Under God’s Wings” (Luke 13:31-35)**

Happy Mother’s Day! Today we celebrate, honour, give thanks for, and remember our mothers. As well, we celebrate the many nurturing women in our lives. Usually, this day is a happy one and if our mothers are still with us, we give them gifts, have special meals with them or give them a phone call. Yet this day is not without it’s share of mixed emotions. For those who have lost their moms, this day brings heartbreak and sorrow because their absence. For others, their relationship with their mother is troubled and maybe even broken. Some have experienced the pain of abandonment, neglect and even abuse, which makes this day very challenging.

At the same time, some women desperately want to be mothers, but can’t for one reason or another. Some have lost babies through stillbirth or miscarriage and the memory of what might have been continues to haunt them. Others have lost their children. Still others knew that they couldn’t adequately care for their babies, so they gave them up for adoption, which is not an easy thing to do. Finally, there are moms who are finding it hard to cope right now. They are exhausted, frustrated, isolated, and angry. Maybe they even feel guilty and less than adequate. Mother’s Day has a mixture of emotions for many people.

At first glance, this morning’s Scripture lesson doesn’t have much to do with mothers; it’s not a typical passage for a Mother’s Day sermon. Jesus’ confrontation with the Pharisees and his woeful predictions aren’t conducive to the warm and cuddly emotions often associated with Mother’s Day. Yet hidden within this passage is a beautiful image of mothering. This passage from Luke’s gospel occurs in the larger section of Jesus’ fateful journey to Jerusalem, which began in 9:51, when he turned his face toward the holy city. In this episode, we see some Pharisees warning Jesus of Herod Antipas’ murderous intentions toward him (Luke 13:31). This, of course, raises some questions about the Pharisees’ exact motives in issuing this threat. But their warning appeared to be aimed at dissuading Jesus from continuing his messianic mission. They seemed to be advising Jesus to lay low and stop stirring things up in order to stay safe. Jesus, of course, wasn’t going to be so easily deterred from his goal. Undaunted by their words, Jesus boldly declared his intention to carry on with the work he was called to do. He had a clear message for Herod, that fox*,* “*I will keep on casting out demons and healing people today and tomorrow; and the third day I will accomplish my purpose*” (Luke 13:32). Jesus was on the road that led to Jerusalem. And there, in the holy city he would accomplish his mission and meet the same fate as many of God’s messengers had before him. For many of God’s prophets had come to bad ends and his life would be no different. Reflecting on this sad history, Jesus utters a sorrowful lament over Jerusalem:

“*O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones God’s messengers! How often I have wanted to gather your children together as a hen protects her chicks beneath her wings, but you wouldn’t let me”* (Luke 13:34).

In the space of a single verse, Jesus conveyed the depth of God’s love, longing and heartbreak for his children. Time and time again, with great love and compassion, God reached out, yet his overtures of love were often met with resistance and rejection. Sadly, this is still happening today. To illustrate God’s great love and longing for humanity, Jesus used the image of a mother hen stretching out her wings over her chicks in order to protect them from danger. Scripture uses this *metaphor of mothering* to explain the heart of God and this is the point that I want to stress.

Last week, I spoke of God’s *transcendence,* the fact that God is separate from the world that we know and cannot be fully grasped by human beings because he is above and beyond the earthly things that we know of. It is impossible for us to comprehend God’s nature in a complete way. Yet God is also *immanent*, that is, he reaches down to humanity with love, care and compassion. One component of God’s immanence is his desire to communicate with humanity and the Holy Scriptures are evidence of this. Written in human languages, Hebrew and Greek, they convey God’s message to humanity. The Scriptures also explain God’s nature in human language. In order to express the inexpressible, the Bible uses vivid images and metaphors to illustrate what God is like. For instance in Psalm 23, God is described as a *shepherd.* This metaphor for God communicates his love, care, protection, and guidance for us, his sheep.

When we call God “our Father” and use masculine pronouns for God we are not saying that God is male. God transcends the human distinction between the sexes. He is neither man nor woman; he is God. The Scriptures are comfortable with this idea, using pictures for God that express his loving care in terms of fathering and mothering, which brings us to this lovely image from Luke 13:34.

This image of a mother bird sheltering her young beneath her wings is found in other places within Scripture, such as Ruth 2:12 and Psalms 17:8 and 91:4. For instance, we read these words in Psalm 57:1, “*Have mercy on me, my God, have mercy on me, for in you I take refuge. I will take refuge in the shadow of your wings until the disaster has passed*.” This metaphor illustrates the defensive action that mother birds take to protect their young from danger, even sacrificing their own lives in order to keep their chicks safe. This is the nature of God’s love for us and isn’t it a beautiful picture?

Other passages of Scripture apply mothering images to God. For instance, God comforts his people with these words in Isaiah 66:13, “*As a mother comforts her child, so will I comfort you; and you will be comforted over Jerusalem*” (Isaiah 66:13). Finally, in Isaiah 49:14, the holy city, symbolizing God’s people, cries out in sorrow, “The Lord has forsaken me, the Lord has forgotten me.” Have you ever felt that way about God? Forsaken and forgotten? Listen to God’s response to his children:

“*Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you!”* (Isaiah 49:15).

It would be an absurd thing for a mother to forget the baby she nursed or fail to show compassion for the baby she birthed. But even if earthly mothers have shortcomings, God is like the mother who never forsakes nor forgets us.

I was adopted as a baby and I was reunited with my birth mother in 1993. I was good to find that missing piece of the puzzle and it was a very positive experience to meet her. Prior to our first meeting we were required to write introductory letters to each other. It was clear from her letter, how difficult it was for her to give me up. She wrote:

“I guess I’ll begin from the last vivid memory of you. It was my last day in hospital and I knew this was it, you would be going on to a family and this was my last chance to say goodbye. I knew that I couldn’t possibly raise you on my own, but I wished with all my heart that I could. I shed a lot of tears on your little dark head.”

I cannot imagine what it was like for her, a young, 17 year old girl. She knew she couldn’t raise a baby on her own and it was not easy for her to say goodbye. But she never forgot.

In the past, I’ve been a bit resistant to preach a Mother’s Day sermon. I heard both good and not so good sermons on Mother’s Day. Sometimes, they paint a picture of motherhood so ideal that no woman could possibly achieve it. Mother’s Day sermons are intended to be encouraging, but they can also be discouraging, especially when the mothers in your church are finding it hard to cope. I know from being a parent that along with the love that your feel for your kids, there is frustration, disappointment and anger. Mixed up with your care and the compassion for your children, there is exhaustion and weariness. Sometimes you want a break from motherhood. But don’t feel guilty, inadequate or alone for God is with you, sheltering you under his wings.

Mothers need motherly care and support. While God gives the greatest love and care, God’s people are his instruments of his maternal love. We are like the wings of the mother hen, protecting and supporting our moms, especially when they are finding life challenging. To all who are sorrowful, stressed out, fearful or in pain, I speak to you God’s comforting words, “*As a mother comforts her child, so will I comfort you”* (Isaiah 66:13). May we all find safe shelter in the shadow of God’s wings.