

Did You Know?

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We all know that God is much bigger than we are. Much bigger than we can ever imagine. So, down through the centuries, people of faith have used a whole host of images to say something about this Mystery that is God. The best we can say is this, "God is like...." A rock. A fortress. A good shepherd. A father. King of kings. And so on. Of course, all these images limp, because they describe some of what the person of faith experiences, but not the whole of it. The more images we have, the closer we can come to entering into the immense Mystery of God. So, let me offer a few more images, some that are not normally in our repertoire, that express the "femaleness" of God.

As recently as 1978, Pope John Paul I said this, "God is a Father; more than that, God is a Mother." He was drawing on our revered tradition in Scripture, of course, to make that claim. Isaiah the prophet pictured God as a birthing mother (42:14): "... now I will cry out like a woman in labor, I will gasp and pant." And, for a people in exile, longing to come home, Isaiah described God as the most tender of mothers (49:15): "Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you." Following in this tradition, Jesus compared himself to a mother hen, longing to gather together the children of Jerusalem under his wings (Luke 13:34).

Many other female images of God are to be found, for we are told that God created the first humans, male and female, in the divine image (Genesis 1:26-27). What follows is but a small sampling. The Wisdom of God emerges first in the Book of Proverbs, compiled after the Exile (some 500 years before the time of Jesus). But it's not until the Book of Wisdom (written in the first century before Jesus) that Wisdom is described as "a spotless mirror of the working of God, and an image of his goodness" (Wisdom 7:26). Indeed, in this book, the Exodus experience of deliverance is described in terms of Wisdom (10:15-21): "A holy people and blameless race wisdom delivered from a nation of oppressors.... she guided them along a marvelous way, and became a shelter to them by day, and a starry flame through the night. She brought them over the Red Sea, and led them through deep waters...." According to Paul (1Corinthians 1:30), Jesus became "wisdom from God," that we might be saved. It was this Jesus who described the compassion of God in terms of an ordinary woman seeking a lost coin (Luke 15:8-10).