

As a Mother Comforts Her Child

Isaiah 66:12-13

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When I was a child in small-town Texas, Mother's Day was a day for flowers and church and food. We all dressed up in our best dresses and wore boutonnieres pinned on our shoulders representing our mothers – colorful flowers if our mother was living and white ones if she had passed away. Often a gentle tear would fall in memory when white flowers were pinned on. Then everyone – and I mean everyone – went to church with their mothers and grandmothers. It was a high-attendance Sunday. The churches were packed full. Often the pastor would honor the woman with the most children. Afterward, we went home and one of those mothers or grandmothers would serve us a great feast. There was no taking mom out to eat that day, because in Texas there were Blue Laws – laws that kept businesses closed on Sunday – so on Mother's Day, mother cooked an even bigger meal than usual. Is that how you remember Mother's Day where you grew up?

I hope you had a wonderful mother and other mothering spirits in your life – grandmothers, aunts, teachers, neighbors, friends. Let us give thanks for them and celebrate their loving and nurturing presence for us along the way. It should be no surprise to any of you that for me, this would be my grandmother, and I give thanks for her today.

If you had children, I hope that your relationships with them are pure joy. You have been blessed, and we celebrate you.

But I have to say that – even though Mother's Day and church are inextricably linked in my memory – I always find it difficult to celebrate Mother's Day in worship. This is a secular holiday, after all, not a religious one. But it is also difficult to celebrate Mother's Day here because we are human, and no human relationship is perfect. Sometimes our relationships are very far from perfect. Our experiences of motherhood are so different, and sometimes so painful, in ways that the Hallmark holiday doesn't account for, but our faith should.

I remember vividly a worship service when I was in seminary –in my fifties – when the pastor offered a Mother's Day prayer. He walked the aisles of the church in a great circle as he prayed, quietly naming those for whom Mother's Day may be terribly difficult, a reminder of a failed relationship or a promise lost. That prayer was a blessing to me. And so, I thought this morning I would offer you that same kind of blessing in this reflection, and then we will find some good news in sacred text.

Let us now gently acknowledge those who have longed for the blessings of motherhood and not received them. If this fits your life, I pray that you will feel silently seen by our hearts and by God this morning. Let us acknowledge

- all those – women and men – whose mothers abused or neglected them
- those who were abandoned by their mothers
- those whose mothers were emotionally absent
- those whose mothers were overwhelmed by addiction or mental illness
- all those whose mothers, for whatever reason, were unable or unwilling to offer them loving care
- those who were required to mother their own siblings because their mothers were unable to

We see you. God sees you. We grieve with you. We bless you this morning for surviving, for finding other mothering souls to care for you, for mothering yourself. We bless you.

Let us also acknowledge

- those who longed to be mothers but were unable to conceive
- all who have suffered miscarriage
- those who grieve the loss of a child
- those whose relationships with their children are not what they dreamed of
- those who are estranged from their children
- all those who for any reason find motherhood to be heartbreak rather than joy

We see you. God sees you. We grieve with you. And we bless you this morning. We bless you.

I promised a moment ago that we would find some good news in sacred text, and so I turn now to our scripture from Isaiah. This is at the very end of the Book of Isaiah, which is about the return of the people of Israel from exile in Babylon to their beloved home in Jerusalem, which had been destroyed in war. I chose this passage for the mothering image of God that it offers us. Here God says, "As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you."

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We have so many male images for God, don't we – God the Father, God the King. But we know that God is bigger than any human picture we might paint. God can come to us in many forms. And this morning we are reminded that God can mother us. God can be the mother we never had, or never had the chance to be. God can hold us and comfort us when no one else will.

There are some other texts – in Hosea and Proverbs -- that describe God as a mother bear, lashing out to protect her cubs from danger. God is just that fierce in our defense.

When human mother-love reaches its limits, it is GOD'S love that knows no end.

So, on this Mother's Day, let us celebrate the mothers we had and the mothers we wish we had. Let us honor our own relationships with our children and know we have done the best we could. Let us leave room for the pain and sorrow that many are feeling on this holiday. And today, let us open the doors of our hearts to God, who will comfort us as a mother should, to God, who will protect us, even if others did not, to God who sees us just as we are and loves us to the ends of the earth.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.