

“Mothering us into (Easter) Life”
Easter 4C (May 12, 2019)
Rev. Dr. David A. Kaden

>>Put a hand on our shoulder and point us in the right direction. Put our hand on someone’s shoulder and let it matter. Amen.<<

On Friday the *Huffington Post* published a series of images on its website titled “18 Amazing Photos You Missed this Week.”¹ One picture is of a woman leaving a polling station in the village of Neemrana in northern India wearing flowing red and green robes. Her vote is one of millions cast in a marathon election cycle in India that has been marred by bombings and clashes between rival political parties. Another picture is of 124 airline pilots standing in two parallel V shapes looking up at a camera. The pilots are all women representing 33 different airlines around the world gathered in Sydney, Australia for an annual conference of the International Society of Women Airline Pilots. Another picture is of Muslim men - some sleeping, some mingling - on the floor of a mosque in Jakarta, Indonesia during the month of Ramadan. There’s a picture of Queen Elizabeth with an intense look on her face as she sits in the rain watching two of her horses compete in the Royal Windsor Horse Show. Added to this collage of images are a couple of cornier ones. There’s a picture of a dude sitting in the stern of a boat off the coast of Ireland, dressed as a stormtrooper from Star Wars taking a selfie with his phone. But to me the most random image in the collection of “18 Amazing Photos You Missed this Week” is of a chicken walking across a road in Ertingen, Germany. The chicken is crossing the road by walking on a crosswalk that was specially created by a local resident of the town. The crosswalk includes a bold blue sign with a picture of a chicken crossing the road that warns drivers to stop. The local resident created the crosswalk with the sign so that the chicken could safely cross the road to drink from a village fountain on the other side. As I looked at the image I realized there was yet another answer to that age-old question, Why did the chicken cross the road? In Ertingen, Germany, it’s to get to the *water fountain* on the other side.

What draws me to images such as these - images of a woman voting in India, of pilots in Australia who are part of an International Society of Women Airline Pilots, of Muslim worshippers napping and chatting during Ramadan, of Queen Elizabeth rooting for her horses, of Irish stormtroopers taking selfies, of a chicken crossing the road in Germany - what draws me to such images is the ways in which they depict the diversity of life in our world. They’re life-affirming images. I don’t think it’s a stretch to call them “Easter images,” images of life and beauty and humor - images of the persistence of life this week; of still-life empty tombs even as so many crosses still dot our world. Crosses like the school shooting in Colorado on Tuesday that robbed Maria and John Castillo of their son Kendrick; a cross that robbed yet another mother of her child just days before Mother’s Day. Crosses like the tragic passing of Rachel Held Evans at age 37 on May 4th, author of our Lenten book study *Inspired*, and mother of a 3 year old and an infant. Let me talk about Rachel Held Evans for just a moment. I’ve been an avid Twitter user for years now, and I’ve never seen such an outpouring of grief for one person on that social media platform before. Several hashtags were created to memorialize her. One person Tweeted that “Rachel changed the world. Turned it upside down and spread life-giving truth. May millions of women rise up in her stead and continue to shape the church and the world” Another wrote that “[Rachel’s]

¹ https://www.huffpost.com/entry/18-amazing-photos-you-missed-this-week_n_5cd5c530e4b0705e47dbf62b

words are and will always be the sunshine that this soul, my soul needs.” “She was a role model,” wrote another. Another wrote, “I went back to church because of Rachel.” And still another wrote, “[Rachel] stood up for what matters in the public square: intellectual honesty, compassion, faith, justice, humility. None of us can fill her shoes, but I can put mine on and walk into scarier places than I used to go [because of her].” And the presiding Bishop of the Episcopal church in the United States, Michael Curry - who preached at the wedding of Prince Henry and Meghan Markle, Tweeted that Rachel “was a fearless seeker of truth and servant of Jesus, and her witness will inspire and heal generations to come.” *The Washington Post* wrote that “[Rachel] used her writing to build ... bridges [for people] to get back to God’s love, to one another, and to the church.” *The New York Times* wrote that “Her congregation was online, and her Twitter feed became her church, a gathering place for thousands to question, find safety in their doubts, and learn to believe in new ways.” *The Atlantic* wrote that Rachel “spent her life trying to follow an itinerant preacher and carpenter, who ... hung out with rejects and oddballs,” and because of that, she filled those who “felt hurt by or unwelcome in the Church” with “encouragement and defiant acceptance.” She was “one of the most formidable figures in contemporary Christianity,” wrote *The New Yorker*.

Women voting in India, pilots in Australia, Muslim worshippers during Ramadan, Queen Elizabeth and her horses, stormtrooper selfies, chickens crossing roads, a 37 year old mom whose writing and Christian activism changed lives - we might call them all stories that “celebrate life” as house music DJ Eelke Kleijn puts it. Celebrate life on this day when we honor our mothers who gave birth to us, who gave us life.

Today’s scripture readings are both life-affirming. Psalm 23 is one of the most well-known passages in all of scripture. Many of us know its comforting words by heart, and probably in the time-honored poetry of the King James Bible: *The LORD is my shepherd I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures; he leadeth me beside the still waters...* is how that translation begins. And it goes on to use phrases that stick in your head - phrases like *he restoreth my soul; he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name’s sake; yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death; my cup runneth over; surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life.* Words and phrases with the power to take root, to plant themselves in our souls, and then sprout to season our lives - especially during life’s most challenging and painful moments - season our lives with a touch of grace. The words and phrases are so familiar that it’s easy to miss the shift in pronouns right in the middle of the Psalm. The first part of the Psalm makes a series of statements about God; God is called “The LORD” and “he”: The LORD is my shepherd; *he* makes me lie down in green pastures; *he* leads me...; *he* restores me... . Then a shift takes place, and the Psalm becomes a prayer. “Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for *you* are with me” The Psalm becomes a direct address - a prayer - addressing God as one would a parent: I won’t be afraid, dad; I won’t be afraid, mom; *you* are with me.

Around the year 1400 CE, a Christian mystic named Julian of Norwich wrote about God as a mother figure. “Just as God is our Father,” she once wrote, “so God is also our Mother.”² “[W]hen [a child] is hurt or frightened,” wrote Julian, “it runs to its mother for help as fast as it can; and [God] wants us to do the same, like a humble child, saying, ‘My kind Mother, my gracious Mother, my dearest Mother, take pity on me.’”³ And in response to our request,

² Quoted in: http://www.vatican.va/spirit/documents/spirit_20010807_giuliana-norwich_en.html

³ Quoted in: <https://blogs.bl.uk/digitisedmanuscripts/2016/05/god-as-mother.html>

wrote Julian, God our Mother replies, “All shall be well and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.” Going back to Psalm 23 with Julian of Norwich as our guide, maybe we can adjust the words: The LORD is my mother-shepherd; I lack for nothing. She helps me to rest in lush pastures; she leads me beside calming waters; she restores my life. One modern translator of Psalm 23 turns the language into that of a child speaking to her mom: “God is like my Mommy,” says that version. “My mommy holds my hand; I’m not afraid. She leads me to school in the mornings; she lets me play in the playground and park. Even when we walk among the crowds and the cars, I am not afraid. If I can reach her hand or her coat, I know she’s with me, and I’m all right. ... I want to live all my life with Mommy, in my Mommy’s home for ever and ever.”

There’s a scene in William Young’s novel *The Shack* that powerfully depicts God as a comforting mother. The protagonist in the story is Mackenzie, who lived through a horrific family tragedy that wrecked his faith. Going back to the place where the tragedy occurred - a place he calls, The Shack - Mackenzie met God. Mackenzie always thought of God as a distant, demanding old man in the sky with a flowing white beard, grizzled, and gruff. But the God Mackenzie met at The Shack appeared before him as a large African American woman cooking in a kitchen. When she saw him, writes William Young, she “engulfed him in her arms, lifting him off his feet spinning him around like a little a child. And all the while she was [speaking] his name - Mackenzie Allen Phillips - with the ardor of someone seeing a long-lost and deeply-loved relative.” After putting him back down, God, with her hands on his shoulders, pushed him back as if to get a good look at him. “‘Mackenzie, look at you!’ she ... [exclaimed]. ‘Here you are, and so grown up. I have really been looking forward to seeing you face to face. It is so wonderful to have you here with me. My my my how I do love you!’ And with that she wrapped herself around him again.”

Today’s scripture reading from Revelation also captures this motherly quality of God. Today’s reading begins with praise. All the children whom God birthed are depicted as standing before the divine throne - children, says the writer, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, singing a song of love to God. And this multitude of God’s children, whom God birthed into life, says the writer, will never know hunger or thirst anymore; they will find protection; and be led to calming waters; and God - as mothers do when their children fall down and scrape a knee - God, says the writer, will wipe every tear from their eye. It’s a life-affirming vision of a safe place, a warm meal, a tear wiped away, a loving embrace. An image of God meant to draw us in, open us up, help us give ourselves permission to be loved unconditionally.

...I want to close this morning with another story of life and love. It’s told by the late Rachel Held Evans in her book *Inspired*. She shares a story of her experience of pregnancy with her now three-year-old.⁴ Held Evans likened the forty weeks of pregnancy to the symbolic number “forty” in the Bible - a symbol, she wrote, of “a prolonged period of hardship, waiting, and wandering” “I ... was called into a forty-week wilderness of sorts,” she wrote, “when just a few months after enduring the heartache of a miscarriage, I found myself sitting on the bathroom floor staring once again at a little pink cross on a pregnancy test, my heart pounding so loud I was sure the neighbors could hear it. I plugged the number [of days of my new pregnancy] into an app on my phone. ‘Congratulations!’ it chirped. ‘Your baby

⁴ Rachel Held Evans, *Inspired: Slaying Giants, Walking on Water, and Loving the Bible Again* (Nashville: Nelson Books, 2018), 44ff.

is the size of a lentil.’ Calling to mind the image of a single brown seed, imagining its weightless presence in the palm of my hand, I felt a sudden wave of nausea. Could anything be more fragile, more helpless? How could something so small take up so much space in my mind and heart? ‘Way to go!’ my phone buzzed four weeks later. ‘Your baby is the size of a kumquat!’ I had to google kumquat,” she admitted. “And on it went, for forty long weeks - a veritable cornucopia of ... approximations meant to congratulate the expectant mother on the advancement of forces largely out of her control. Avocado. Turnip. Spaghetti squash. Rutabaga. Eggplant. I half expected our OB to look over my legs after the last, long push in the delivery room and declare, ‘Congratulations! It’s a canary melon!’” Held Evans goes on to describe the anxious waiting of her pregnancy. “At night I turned our bedsheets inside out and upside down, tossing through fitful dreams [the specter of miscarriage in my mind], and during the day, I obsessed over every subtle shift in ligament pain, every excruciating hour between those reassuring in utero hiccups and kicks. It seemed every conceivable story of pregnancy complication or loss found its way to my social media feed, and as my skin stretched over my belly, it was as if it became more porous, more absorbent of the suffering of others, particularly the mothers and children whose flight from violence in Syria and Iraq occupied the news hour each night. I’ve always had an active imagination,” she wrote, “but pregnancy sent it into overdrive, the scenarios it conjured enough to impress the most ambitious horror novelist. By week thirty, I’d committed to memory the ‘Complications’ index in *What to Expect When You’re Expecting* For nine long months, this mix of excitement and fear pulsed through me. I used to tell people my favorite sound was a train whistle echoing off the mountains in the distance, but now it is, unequivocally, the steady throb of a baby’s heartbeat from a fetal Doppler. How I lived to hear that sweet cadence fill the exam room every two weeks! Our son was born in early February, on Candlemas Day, which for many liturgical Christians marks the conclusion of the nativity seasons of Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany. Lumbering through the third trimester during this auspicious period stoked in me a new affection for Mary of Nazareth and transformed the [familiar] words of [scripture]: *‘And so it was, that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered.’* ... What volumes hid between those lines! The morning sickness, the hormones, the round ligament pain, the sleepless nights, the anxiety, the fear, those first startling kicks and those first piercing cries - all the [daily] challenges of pregnancy” Here’s how she concludes: “There are few doctrines of the Christian faith more astounding to me than the incarnation, the remarkable notion that the God of the universe was once vulnerable as a fetus and hungry as a baby. Mary knew the humanity of Christ more intimately than anyone, from the moment that humanity manifested itself in ... a sudden sensitivity to heat and smell, [and] that strange aversion to eggs and insatiable craving for lamb. ... Two millennia later, in the longest hours of my own unremarkable pregnancy, [the story of Mary] from the gospel of Luke invited me to press on, to fear not.”

...Maybe this day, today, Mother’s Day can connect us more intimately to the sacredness of our lives; can connect us more intimately to the nurturing care of God-as-mother - the God who is like a shepherd leading us to safety, reassuring us when we’re afraid, wiping tears from our eyes, and loving us into a richer Easter life. Amen.