

“Shelter, Sun, Shepherd, and other Pictures of God: The Gospel According to Songwriters”

Easter 4A (May 3, 2020) - **COVID-19 (Sunday 8)**

Scripture: Psalm 23; 1 Corinthians 13:4-8a; John 10:1-11

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>>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.<<

The day before International Women's Day in March of 2017, a four foot bronze statue of a little girl was installed in Manhattan's Bowling Green Park. Her name is *Fearless Girl*. *Fearless Girl* stood defiantly in Bowling Green - feet firmly planted on the ground, hands on her hips, stoic face with an unflinching gaze, staring into the eyes of the bronze *Charging Bull* statue. *Fearless Girl* was created by artist Kristen Visbal; *Charging Bull* was created by artist Arturo Di Modica after the 1987 market crash, and installed in the Financial District in 1989 to symbolize the energy and unpredictability of Wall Street capitalism, but also the promise of bull markets. Arturo Di Modica didn't create a bronze *bear* for the Financial District. *Charging Bull* is 11 feet tall and 16 feet long and weighs over 7,000 pounds. The defiant, *Fearless Girl* that stared into his eyes is only four feet tall and weighs just 250 pounds. She symbolizes the importance of gender diversity in the workplace. And, as of April of last year, she has a new home: staring defiantly at the New York Stock Exchange, an even bigger symbol of Wall Street capitalism.<sup>1</sup> After she was moved to a new location, Mayor Bill de Blasio said, “[*Fearless Girl* is a symbol] of standing up to fear, standing up to power, being able to find in yourself the strength to do what's right.” She also symbolizes the power of women in leadership.

Last week Forbes Magazine published an article with the title “What Do Countries with the Best Coronavirus Responses Have in Common?: Women Leaders.”<sup>2</sup> The article examined the data and the responses to the current crisis in Germany, Taiwan, New Zealand, Iceland, Finland, Norway, and Denmark, and found that women leaders speak the truth to the public more frequently than their male counterparts do, they are more decisive, they have used available technology more effectively, and they show more empathy. For example, says the Forbes article, “Back in January,” Tsai Ing-wen, Taiwan's leader, “introduced 124 measures to block the spread [of the virus]” that have become a model for other countries. “She is now sending 10 million face masks to the U.S. and Europe.” Her decisive and early response has been called “among the world's best.” Jacinda Ardern of New Zealand was one of the first world leaders to impose a lockdown and self-isolation on people entering the country with the goal of eliminating the virus. As of Monday, New Zealand reported just one new infection case.<sup>3</sup> And “Norway's Prime Minister, Erna Solberg, according to the Forbes article, “had the innovative idea of using television to talk directly to her country's children. ... [She] held a ... press conference where no adults were allowed, ... [and] she responded to kids' questions from across the country, taking time to explain why it was OK to feel scared.” “The originality and obviousness of the idea,” says Forbes Magazine, “takes one's breath away. ... [T]he empathy and care which all of these [women] leaders have communicated,” says the article, “seems to come from an alternate universe than the one we have gotten used

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/10/nyregion/fearless-girl-statue-stock-exchange-.html?smid=tw-nytimes&smtyp=cur>

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<https://www.forbes.com/sites/avivahwittenbergcox/2020/04/13/what-do-countries-with-the-best-coronavirus-reponses-have-in-common-women-leaders/?fbclid=IwAR0V02RCOWVVJzJKTLPD1MfvXWAP4EJ8QOuYPaBzpT6yceig90WjMu7ucPc#3eade8c53dec>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.cnn.com/2020/04/28/asia/new-zealand-coronavirus-outbreak-elimination-intl-hnk/index.html>

to. It's like their arms are coming out of their videos to hold you close in a heart-felt and loving embrace. Who knew leaders could sound like this? ... Now," continues the article, "compare these leaders and stories with the strongmen using the crisis to ... blame 'others,' capture-the-judiciary, demonize-the-journalists, [and lie to the public.]" They also all happen to be leading countries with the worst infection rates.

When the Bible talks about God it almost always uses masculine pronouns: God as "he," "him," "his." A male, *Charging Bull* God instead of a *Fearless Girl*, a strongman instead of a wise, empathetic, and decisive woman. A father instead of a mother. Feminist theologians have taught us that the male pronouns and images are like pencil erasers, erasing the feminine side of God, erasing the gender-fluid side of God, and creating an androcentric image God - a male-centered God, a "he," "him," "his." One of my advisors at Harvard - a feminist Catholic - used to say in class, "history, theology, and the Bible were written by the historical winners." In other words, the men with the power and resources to shape religious language. Still, though, the Bible is filled with many feminine pictures of God. In Genesis, human beings were created in God's image, "male *and female*, God created them," it says. The Hebrew prophet Hosea describes God as a mother lovingly lifting her human babies to her cheek. Hosea also describes God as exploding with anger, like a mother bear robbed of her cubs. Watch out for that God, says Hosea, she's ferocious. Deuteronomy likens God to a mother eagle protecting her eggs, and Deuteronomy also describes God as a mother who "gave birth" to Israel. The prophet Isaiah likens God to a comforting mother who nurses her children. One Psalmist likens God to a mother who holds him close, nuzzling him. Jesus speaks of God as a mother hen protecting her chicks, and as a woman who searches her house for lost coins - a parable about a mothering God searching for her lost children. And God the Spirit appears in scripture as wind and breath, a gentle breeze and a gale, a dove and a raging fire, gender-neutral in form: male and female, both and neither. The androcentric eraser hasn't erased everything.

There are so many pictures of God in scripture - so many names and artistic expressions - that trying to narrow them all down to a single one is a Sisyphean task. And trying to narrow them all down to a single pronoun - a "he" or a "her" or a "them" - puts limits on the God whose essence is unnameable, as Reformation theologian John Calvin once noted. The best we can do when talking about God, he said, is to grope. There's a long history in eastern Orthodox Christianity called apophatic theology: saying what God is *not*, because as soon as we try to say what God *is* our language fails us. God is *not* a "he" or a "she" or a "them"; God is *not* a "dove" or a "gale" or a "raging fire" or a "gentle breeze" or a "breath," but always more - more than what our feeble language can possibly name. Our Jewish siblings in faith often point to that story in Exodus when God meets with Moses and says, "I am who I am" - *Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh*, in Hebrew - a nameless name, a name that is better breathed than spoken.

Today's scripture readings all grope to speak of God. Today's Exodus reading is about breathing God's name instead of speaking it. God as a breath instead of a name. Today's Psalm and today's gospel reading use the image of a shepherd. "I am the good shepherd," says Jesus. "The LORD is my shepherd," sings the Psalmist. Jesus claims to be using a figure of speech, picture language, metaphorical language. It's the only time in John's gospel that Jesus speaks in this way. John's gospel is the only New Testament gospel that portrays Jesus as *not* teaching with parables except in today's reading. Today's reading delves into

the world of metaphor - the language of groping for pictures of God: I am the good shepherd, says Jesus. God is a shepherd, says the Psalmist. Psalm 23 is perhaps the most well-known passage in the whole Bible - the most requested passage at memorial services, and one that many of us have committed to memory. But it's the language of God that is most interesting to me in this Psalm - this poem, this song. Psalm 23 claims to have been written by "David." David in the Old Testament was a warrior, a king, a poet, a musician, and he began his career as a shepherd. "The LORD is my shepherd," he sings. It's a metaphor. Not the language of one-to-one correspondence. God *isn't* a shepherd, but is merely *like* a shepherd. It's a simile. An analogy. God is *like* a shepherd. God is *like* a Father. God is *like* a Mother. God is *like* a rushing wind, or a raging fire, or a still small voice, a mere breath, or a dove, or a gentle breeze.

I find it interesting that David, the Psalmist, the poet, the songwriter likens God to something from his own experience. David was a shepherd, and so he said that God is *like* a shepherd. It's a little theological tidbit that cracks open the door for us to see in scripture how the language about God is shaped by the biblical writers' own experiences. The kings in scripture said God is *like* a king. The warriors in scripture said God is *like* a warrior. The children in scripture said God is *like* a parent, a father or a mother. Those who observed nature said God is *like* a mothering eagle, *like* a mother bear, *like* a mother hen, *like* a gale-force wind, *like* a wildfire, *like* a gentle breeze. Scripture's poets and songwriters used images drawn from everyday life to describe what God is *like*. Today's songwriters do the same. Bob Dylan once sang about "Shelter from a Storm," which makes me think of God as being *like* a shelter. "Try imagining a place where it's safe and warm," sang Dylan, it's a "shelter from the storm." Eddie Vedder, singer in the band *Pearl Jam*, once sang about a "Hard Sun," which also makes me think of God. "She is comfort by my side," he sang; she "opens up my eyes." She's *like* the sun. Thom Yorke of the band *Radiohead* sang a newly released song on Wednesday night that spoke of "*plasticine figures, mould[ed] to suit your taste*" - a song that makes me think of how we shape God into pictures that feel familiar to us. And Robert Smith of the band *The Cure* once sang about "*pictures of you*" that almost seem "real." Pictures. Pictures of God. God as *like* a father or a mother, *like* a warrior or a king, *like* a mother bear or an eagle, *like* a charging bull or a fearless girl. When we read those ancient pictures of God in scripture, we're reading the ways ancient writers from their own life experiences imagined God. God as *like* this or *like* that. Metaphors and similes that grope to describe what is by definition ineffable. Christian writers throughout history have groped to describe God. In the fourteenth century, Julian of Norwich claimed that God spoke to her saying, "I am the power and the Goodness of the Father, I am the Wisdom of the Mother, I am the Light and the Grace which is blessed love, I am the Trinity, I am the Unity, I am the supreme Goodness ... , I am the One who make you love, I am the One who makes you desire, I am the never-ending fulfilment of all true desires." Twentieth century contemplative theologian, Thomas Merton, once said that "It is ... impossible to try to grasp God as an object which can be seized and comprehended by our minds." Poet Christian Wiman once said, "I can feel God only through physical existence, can feel [God's] love in the love of other people." And Professor Brené Brown waxed theological when she wrote that "Spirituality is recognizing and celebrating that we are all inextricably connected to each other by a power greater than all of us."

God is too big, too free-flowing to lock down in human language. Our words just disintegrate. And so we're left to select pictures of God that speak best to us right now.

What picture of God are you turning to right now during this time of crisis? Perhaps it's God as a shelter from the storm. Perhaps it's God as a nursing mother. Perhaps you're finding comfort in God as a strong and sovereign king. Maybe it's the vulnerable God who suffers *with us* who is speaking to you now. Or, maybe it's the God who's made known in the faces of those who are most at risk - a God of compassion and gentle care. The nursing God. Or, maybe God feels distant right now for you, like Aristotle's unmoved mover: impassive, unfeeling, uncaring. The beauty of these diverse pictures is that whichever one we fixate on, there's always *another* to prick our faith in a new direction. If we're uncertain or dark; God appears as shelter and light. If we're filled with anger; God appears as a gentle breeze of compassion. If there's injustice; God rages like a warrior in battle or like a mother bear robbed of her cubs. If we're sad; God draws close like a cooing mother. If we feel weak; God stands firm like *Fearless Girl*. If we feel deceived; God appears as truth. If we're cynical; God roars in like a gale with a message of hope. And no matter where we're at on the journey of faith, the New Testament is clear: God is love. And love, wrote St. Paul, is patient and kind; it does not insist on its own way; it's not resentful; it rejoices in truth; it never ends; and it always has hope.

Let me close this morning with a word of hope from our UCC New York Conference Minister, David Gaewski. His words were written with the season of Advent in mind, but they have a timeless quality. Here's what he says about hope:

*Hope is an apple seed. Hope is striking the match to light the first candle in the dark. Hope is speaking truth ... to power ... even when your voice trembles ... . Hope is sometimes bright and sometimes dim. Hope is the first step on a journey. Hope is mixing yeast into the dough.*

*Hope is the tear you shed when you see injustice done to another. Hope is waiting for the sun to rise. Hope is singing "O Come Emmanuel." Hope is the prayer you whisper, that no one can or will hear. Hope is all you are left with when all you have had is lost. Hope is planting crocus bulbs and then later watching the snow melt. Hope is waiting for shooting stars in the night sky. Hope is opening a note from a loved one. Hope is confessing your fear. Hope stands firm. Hope is also letting go. Hope is raising children. Hope is holding the hand of one who is dying. Hope is closing your eyes. Hope is opening them again.*

Maybe the image of God best suited for our time is this one: God is hope. Amen.