"Mothering God, you gave me birth in the bright morning of this world.
Creator, source of every breath, you are my rain, my wind, my sun."

Does this sound as if they'd been written recently by a feminist pagan?

Actually, these words are part of a song written in the fourteenth century by an English Benedictine nun, Julian of Norwich, whose vision of God, and whose experience of God, was not limited to a grandfatherly or male image – She even dares to call Jesus, *"our Mother."*

This sounds strange to many Christians, since we have been so restricted in our imagination to the idea of God as Father, which God undoubtedly also is.

But biblically-speaking, God is also Mother. And our experience shows us, too, if only we dared to trust it.

If God is real, and if God is revealed to us in the love of those who have loved us, we know that our knowledge of God is not limited to "Father." It is only because we have heard the most common formulation of the Trinity again and again and again that we have come to think that, despite what we know in our hearts, that "Father" is the only acceptable description of God. The only intimate thing we can call God when we speak in prayer.

God is beyond gender, and privileging masculine language is unnecessarily limiting, and it isn't even always very helpful to us. Many images work: God is Creator and Sustainer. God is Protector and Defender. God is our Rock and our Fortress, our shield and deliverer. God is the redeemer of the world. God is Mother AND Father. No single metaphor is complete when describing God, or our intimate knowledge of God.

Consider Hosea, where the Prophet says this about God:

"When Israel was a child, I loved him and called him out of Egypt as my son…I was the one who taught Israel to walk. I took up my people in my arms, but they did not acknowledge that I took care of them…I picked them up and held them to my cheek. I bent down and fed them." (Hosea 11:1-4)

Before that, Israel wandered in the desert because of their stubbornness, even after God had delivered them from Egyptian slavery. But Moses, weary of this, argues with God, and says,

"I did not create these people, or bring them to birth." (Implied, YOU DID!)
"Why should you ask me to act like a nurse and carry them in my arms like babies?" (implied – These obnoxious children are YOUR problem! I am NOT a nursemaid) (Numbers 11:12)

God was their mother, but masculine Moses was not prepared to imitate that God-quality!

In Isaiah, the mothering image is applied even more boldly to God – as God says of Israel, struggling to find their way,

"But now, like a woman in childbirth, I cry out, I gasp and pant." (Is 42:14)

In the same book, farther on, Israel says,

"The Lord has forsaken me, my Lord has forgotten me."

And God replies, *"Can a woman forget her nursing child, and show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even those may forget, yet I will not forget you."*

And a few chapters later, God says to his humiliated, defeated people in exile in Babylon,

"As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you." (Is 66:13)

Even Jesus refers to himself as a mother – an anguished mother hen in Luke 13:31-35,

"Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings and you were not willing."

Perhaps you have seen stories where this has literally happened – where, perhaps in a fire, the mother hen dies, but the chicks under her wings manage to survive.

Jesus wanted, he said, to spread his wings – as a mother hen instinctively does – to protect God's people in Jerusalem. The hen would, and in Jesus' case, literally *did*, sacrifice its life for the vulnerable little ones.

Most of you know Mother Virginia. She tells the story of celebrating the Eucharist as a young priest on a Sunday morning when she began active labor with her first child, Ben. She commented that not only was that a moving experience for her to celebrate Jesus' offering of himself for the world's rebirth and for its joy as she was suffering the pangs of childbirth herself, but that others were moved as well.

Many of the women and men in her congregation were enabled for the first time to see Jesus like that: a mother who will go willingly into suffering to bring children to birth – a God who would die to give us life – For many, that changed their perception of God forever.

In an age where some Christians are giving the world a frightening picture of God as hyper-masculine, sometimes cruel, unmoved by your hunger or poverty or suffering, eager to force you and everyone else into some narrow vision and version of what the gospels call the "good news", which looks to the world and maybe sometimes to some of you - like a pretty awful image of very bad news -

shifting our internal image a bit may be the most helpful things we can do for ourselves and for others.

If I asked you, "Tell me about your image of God…" What would you say? Think deeply about that.

What if God's care, concern, and deep love were not limited to an image of "father" for you?

What if God's tender compassion and no-matter-what forgiveness, God's deep determination to protect you and never to let you go, is beyond even the very best of the mothers among us – or the best mothers you remember from your own childhood?

What if that is really the case?

What if we accepted that as reality?

How would that change the way you treated others, and equally importantly, how you treated/ forgave/ nourished your own tender self?

Here again is the lovely prayer/hymn by Sister Marie Therese Winter that I printed for you in the bulletin:

Mother and God, to you we sing,
Wide is your womb, warm is your wing.
In You we live, move and are fed
Sweet flowing milk, life-giving bread.
Mother and God, to you we bring
All broken hearts,
All broken wings.

Try praying that for a few days – See what it adds to your vision of God.

As the medieval mystic, Julian eloquently summarized, *"As truly as God is our Father, so truly God is our Mother."*