

The Divine Feminine

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[0 : 00] I'm Heidi. I use she, her pronouns. I am the co-director of community here at the table. Good morning. Would you pray with me? Dear Lord, I thank you so much for gathering us all here. I know that we all have so much going on in our lives from work and school and personal lives, and it is no small thing for us to come here on a Sunday morning and gather together and feel your presence. So I thank you for all the ways that you are working in this room, and I just pray that as I preach that you will replace any spirit of anxiety or fear or overwhelm or loss or grief with a steadfast sense of your presence here today. In Jesus' name, amen.

Amen. So these days, I often connect with God the most through worship songs. My faith has evolved so much over the course of my life, and I sometimes struggle to feel as close with God as I did when I was younger. But singing, even though I'm pretty objectively terrible at it, provides a surefire way to connect with God, even when that connection feels elusive.

And many of my favorite worship songs focus on the Holy Spirit rather than God the Father or Jesus. And I think part of that is because the Holy Spirit can be kind of misunderstood, a little shadowy and amorphous. And we spend so much more time talking about God the Father and Jesus. And here at this church, we proudly say that we are obsessed with the way of Jesus, and we are focused on how we are meant to faithfully follow his example. But sometimes the Holy Spirit can fall by the wayside. And for me, the right worship song corrects that imbalance. And one of my favorites has been Fresh Wind by Hillsong. I will often listen to this song when I'm struggling to write a sermon or I'm feeling a little bit empty in my relationship with God. And y'all do not want to hear me sing it, because there's a reason why I'm not on the worship band, but it goes something like this.

Spirit sound, rushing wind, fire of God, fall within. Holy Ghost, breathe on us, we pray.

As we repent, turn from sin, revival embers smoldering, breath of God, fan us into flame.

[2 : 42] We need a fresh wind, the fragrance of heaven. Pour your spirit out, pour your spirit out. And I love the vivid imagery in this song. The Holy Spirit is like a rushing wind. Anyone who's experienced the first few minutes before a thunderstorm knows that sensation of the wind pushing back our hair, turning our umbrella inside out. And the Holy Spirit is also like a fire, which brings to mind cozy days spent by a fireplace with a good book, maybe when it's raining outside, like it's been in D.C. every single weekend. And it also brings to mind the blazing heat of a bonfire.

You can't ignore a fire. It's smell lingers for days, your clothes smell like soot until you can wash them. And this song reminds me that the Holy Spirit is tangible, not transitory.

And this song also celebrates Pentecost. In Jewish culture, Pentecost was known as the Feast of Weeks, or the Feast of Booths. It took place around the spring harvest, 50 days after Passover. And it commemorates the day that the law was given to Moses on Mount Sinai. And for Christians, Pentecost is the day that the Holy Spirit descended to the gathered Jesus followers after Jesus ascended to heaven.

And I was very excited when I learned that I was going to preach on Pentecost. So the only natural place for me to go with this sermon is the Pentecost story itself.

And Zach gave me permission to put a plug in for the Pentecost retreat later. Consider this a preview of what the wonderful prayer and liturgy team has prepared for y'all.

[4 : 29] So if you have a Bible, you can turn to Acts 2 verses 1 through 4. The words will also be on the screen. When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven, there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting.

Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages as the Spirit gave them ability.

This song clearly inspired fresh wind and so many other powerful worship songs about the Holy Spirit. And this mystical language of wind and divided tongues of fire can sometimes feel a little bit unbelievable to a more modern and scientific lens.

But this story is really nothing less than the birth of the church. Prior to this moment, the followers of Jesus were left without their leader. They were gathered in one place, probably to find comfort in one another, because they had no idea what was going to happen next.

But Jesus did not leave them without a promise. In chapter 1, verses 4-5, Jesus orders his followers not to leave Jerusalem, even as tensions rose in the city, and his followers probably feared that they would be captured and even killed themselves.

[6 : 05] And as we read on in Acts, we see how this happens later on. But Jesus tells them, And that is exactly what comes to pass.

Today, I want to invite us to explore how the Holy Spirit expands our conception of who God is, particularly in terms of the gendered language that we often use for God.

Why do we often use masculine language for God? And how might the Holy Spirit and the language used for the Spirit beckon us to a different way? And how does the presence of the Holy Spirit urge us to consider ourselves within our communities differently?

The Holy Spirit is an invitation to consider a more expansive view of God and a more expansive view of ourselves. We learn so much about the Holy Spirit from the second verse alone.

And suddenly from heaven, there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. I love to imagine this as the moment when someone is coming in from outside.

[7 : 28] Maybe it's the middle of winter, but it's one of those like, or it's one of those like blustery spring days. And someone opens the door, comes inside, and along with them comes a great gust of wind that's uncontrollable and unexpected.

And this language of a rushing wind carries us all the way back to Genesis chapter 1, verses 1 through 2. In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void, and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.

The phrase, a wind from God, is translated, the Spirit of God or mighty wind. And the Hebrew word used here is ruach, which is traditionally feminine.

So that final phrase could be read, the Spirit of God, she swept over the face of the waters. And meanwhile, the Hebrew word for God is elohim, which is traditionally characterized as masculine.

So at the very beginning, we see both feminine and masculine language being used for God. Ruach and elohim. And this begins to break open our conception of God.

[8 : 48] Some of us probably only grew up referring to God as male. There are good reasons for that, as on the whole, Scripture does refer to God as masculine all over its pages, and it was written in largely patriarchal societies.

I remember a phase of my life where I always referred to God as He and capitalized it in any written communication out of respect. But our faith shifts in good ways when we open ourselves up to the fact that God is referred to in multiple different ways throughout the Bible, and we don't have to confine ourselves to narrow or binary understandings of who God is.

In the Hebrew Bible, there are so many examples of the divine feminine.

A great place to go for this is Proverbs, and specifically Proverbs 8, which refers to wisdom as a woman standing at the crossroads, crying out to the people.

And later on in Proverbs 8, in verses 22 through 31, there was a beautiful poem about wisdom's role in the creation story of Genesis. The Lord created me at the beginning of His work, the first of His acts of long ago.

[10 : 14] Ages ago, I was set up at the first, before the beginning of the earth. Where there were no depths, I was brought forth. When there were no springs abounding with water, before the mountains had been shaped, before the hills, I was brought forth.

When He had not yet made earth and fields, or the world's first bits of soil. When He established the heavens, I was there. When He drew a circle on the face of the deep.

When He made firm the skies above. When He established the fountains of the deep. When He assigned to the sea its limit, so that the waters might not transgress His command. When He marked out the foundations of the earth.

Then I was beside Him, like a master worker, and I was daily His delight, rejoicing before Him always. Rejoicing in His inhabited world, and delighting in the human race.

If we connect this poem back to Genesis, the Spirit of God hovering over the face of the waters is wisdom herself. A master worker in our own right.

[11 : 21] And wisdom is also a character within the Hebrew Bible, Sophia. She is that aspect of God that is creative, dynamic, and generative.

Always bringing forth a new life. She cannot be contained, but she carves out space for and inhabits all that exists. I wish that I had more time in this sermon to talk about the divine feminism within Judaism, because it's absolutely fascinating, and I would highly recommend Googling it, going down that rabbit hole.

It's amazing. But I did want to talk about how Sophia pops up in the New Testament. She is connected to this idea of the Holy Spirit, and yet simultaneously connected to what we learn about Christ.

John chapter 1, verse 1 reads, In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

This passage refers to logos, or the Word that was present with God at creation. This is connected to ideas of wisdom that we were exploring in Proverbs.

[12 : 32] And here we see a bit of a remix of this Jewish idea of Sophia. Rather than being created before everything else, the logos was always there.

The logos is God and always has been. When we read this passage, we connect the Word to Jesus, but Jesus is also connected to Sophia.

In Proverbs, Sophia is present with God in the beginning. She is an active agent in creating everything that exists. And in John, we see how Jesus is taking on that role.

And I find it fascinating how there are so many ways that the early church fathers from the very beginning, like the early church itself, created these connections between the Spirit and wisdom in Jesus, and a really beautiful exploration of expanding our theology.

And if you're interested in this at all, I would highly recommend looking up the works of Elizabeth Johnson. She is a very prominent feminist theologian.

[13 : 41] She writes a lot about this. And like a really good, like, starting point is abounding in kindness writings for the people of God.

And she writes, Early Christians saw Jesus as a wisdom teacher, speaking sage words and parables, beatitudes, and evocative sayings.

More than this, they depicted him as an envoy sent by wisdom, one of her prophets uttering oracles and laments in the pattern of her speech and offering consolation and knowledge of the intimate ways of God.

He does her deeds. In many ways, Jesus is wisdom incarnate, embodying her way, her truth, and her life.

And as I already mentioned, church fathers and church leaders were making these connections. Athanasius of Egypt, who was very prominent in the fourth century, creates a very, like, concise statement about this connection.

[14 : 49] He says, The wisdom, Sophia, is the word, logos, and this word is Christ. So from the earliest days of the church, there was this connection between wisdom and Jesus and how Jesus embodies both the masculine side of God and the feminine side of God.

And there was no contradiction. In the New Testament, there are countless examples of Jesus taking on feminine characteristics. For example, Matthew 23, verses 37, tells us that Jesus is like a mother hen gathering her chicks under her wing.

And as Tochi is going to explore later this evening, Jesus is also compared to a woman searching for a lost coin in Luke 15. But why does this matter?

Why can't we just refer to God in masculine terms and be done with all of this, like, complicated theology? Why do we have to consider gendered language at all?

I think this conversation is important for a few reasons. One is that feminine language expands our conception of God.

[16 : 03] If we only ever conceive of God as masculine, that leads to one static image. It's like if we only ever called our best friend kind or our partner loving.

It loses so much nuance. I don't want to negate the fact that there is something beautiful in masculine language for God. I have spoken about this in some ways in other sermons, but I have a strained relationship with my family, especially my father, and we haven't really spoken at all for a very, very long time, as much as I wish things could be different.

But considering God as father has been very healing for me as I embrace the God who will never leave me nor forsake me. And yes, scripture does talk about God as father a whole lot.

Jesus himself talks about God as father often. But I wonder if that was just the metaphor that resonated the most with Jesus. I can certainly relate to that.

But there is no one right way to refer to God. All throughout scripture, we see so many different terms for God. God is our provider, our shepherd, our very present help in times of trouble.

[17 : 20] And the first person, whoever names God in the Hebrew scriptures is Hagar, an enslaved woman in the wilderness who names God the one who sees her.

None of these terms are more accurate than the next, but they illuminate different facets of God's character. It has also been healing for me to consider God as both father and mother.

I'm not particularly close to my mother either, but thinking of God as mother comforts me in those moments when I feel most alone. And thinking of God as wisdom, Sophia, shows me how God is working in those small moments of my life like a master worker kneading yeast through dough.

I am able to see a softer, gentler side of God. And I wonder how using feminine language might provide a path to that for some of us today.

And second, expanding our ideas of God confronts unjust power structures. Exclusively masculine language for God can be harmful.

[18 : 28] Elizabeth Johnson talks about this in the same book I previously mentioned. For centuries, male theologians defined women as inferior to men, more bodily than spiritual, more emotional than rational, more passive than capable of agency.

As with any oppressive notion, once this takes hold, it begins to be taken for granted. Over time, women internalize the image that the system feeds them and instinctively think of themselves as less than worthy.

The exclusively male image of God, a powerful element in this system, promotes this mood. Consequently, it reinforces, even legitimizes, patriarchal social structures in family, society, and church.

Language about the Father in heaven who rules over the world justifies and even necessitates in order where men rule thanks to their greater similarity to the source of all being and power.

In other words, if God is male, then men are closer to God and therefore more suitable for rule. Women are further away from God and therefore must submit. And this logic has been reproduced over and over and over again within the church.

[19 : 50] And this has real life and death consequences. I have recently been following a story about a pastor's wife in South Carolina who unfortunately died by suicide after attempting to leave for abusive marriage multiple times.

And there was a little bit of controversy surrounding the story, so I don't want to get into too much of that right now. And it's kind of besides the point. Because this story stands in for the countless similar stories that unfortunately go unremarked upon.

It is yet one more example of male pastors and male leaders being protected from the consequences of wrongdoing when the women are left bereft and reeling without recourse.

When men hold the authority and when women are told to simply submit to male power, then the potential for manipulation, abuse, and violence rises.

I'm not saying it leads to this in every situation, but it happens far too often. And using feminine language for God is not some kind of cure-all, but it does open us up to new ways of understanding God that doesn't place all authority in maleness.

[21 : 03] It acknowledges the fact that we are all equally made in the image of God. And that leads me to my last point. Expanding our language for God transforms our perception of each other within our communities.

Let's return to the story of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Once the Spirit descends on all people, they are able to speak in their native languages and understand one another.

Peter talks about how this fulfills a Hebrew Bible prophecy in Joel chapter 2, verses 28 through 29. In the last days, it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams.

Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days, I will pour out my spirit, and they shall prophesy. This passage urges us toward a fundamental transformation in how we view God and how we view others.

If God cannot be placed into a box, if there are no limits placed on the Holy Spirit, then we cannot be placed inside a box either. For the followers of Jesus who were gathered in that house together, there were so many factors that sought to divide them.

[22 : 32] They were from different places, they had different languages, they were different genders, they came from different socioeconomic backgrounds. But when the Holy Spirit came upon them, she didn't pick and choose who was worthy.

She chose them all as unique image bearers of the living God who were capable of proclaiming the great deeds of God's goodness. And the same is true for us.

I think feminine language for God allows us to see that God contains multitudes, that God cannot be contained, that there are no limits to what God can do.

And I think feminine language is an invitation for us to begin to use that language ourselves. And once we live into that truth that God contains multitudes, that gives us permission and freedom to embody the fact that we do too.

I've shared a little of my story before, but I grew up in a tradition where women were not allowed to be pastors. The first time I saw a woman preach at the table was six years ago.

[23 : 42] And I had no idea it was even possible. Intellectually, I knew that all of us, regardless of gender, are full of the wisdom and strength to proclaim God's goodness in our lives.

But I didn't think it was a path for me. But then I saw how the Holy Spirit filled the women in my life with such a strong conviction of what God was calling them toward.

And I began to see a more expansive view of God, and that gave me the freedom to begin to step into that. And that expansion is only continuing.

For me, most recently, I've come to understand that I am also queer. It is another facet of my identity. And speaking that truth boldly is not a sign that I have fallen away from God, but rather that I am living into the truth of who God has always called me to be.

And the expansive Holy Spirit is there so that I can realize that more fully. Inclusive language for God breaks down barriers and allows us to see each other more clearly for who we are.

[24 : 52] I have focused a lot on feminine language for God in this sermon because I think it is important for us to see that women are equally made in the image of God because this helps break down some of the patriarchal ideas that are replicated in the church and society.

But the existence of the Trinity, creator, sustainer, redeemer, father, son, spirit, shows us that God can equally be called they.

in another sermon we're going to be talking more about the queerness of God but I do just want to acknowledge that God extends past even our gendered language for God.

And none of us are any, are not, but none of us are just one thing. We're not just a mother or a father or a sister or a brother or a co-worker.

We're not just gay or straight or non-binary or shy or introverted or lost or depressed. We can think of ourselves in unique, multifaceted, sometimes even contradictory ways.

[25 : 56] We can view our friends, our communities in the same way. We hold the tension between these different facets of our identity but that doesn't make one facet any more important than the next.

Instead, it reflects how the Holy Spirit is always generating new beginnings and new possibilities. As we see in the Pentecost story, there was power in showing up as our full selves and being understood for our varied perspectives.

Once we start viewing God as multifaceted and exploring the radical nature of God, we see how there are no limits that we can place on God. And then that continues on with viewing ourselves and each other as equal participants of the expansive work that God is doing.

Just like in a worship song, we might focus on the notes or the melody or the harmony. We might consider the vocals or the drums or the piano but they all join together to form a beautiful song.

We can't have the song without the notes but neither are the notes complete without the song. In much the same way, we hold up different aspects of God's character, see their unique beauty and step back to see how God is working.

[27 : 18] And we can do the same for each other. So this week, I just want to invite us to consider the language we use for God. Maybe try praying to God as mother and see how that feels in our bodies and our hearts.

Or look for specific terms for God that resonate with you, whether that is referring to God as they, whether that is comforter, redeemer, sustainer. And I also invite us to consider how we view one another, view each other more expansively and seek understanding through our differences.

May we open ourselves up to how the Spirit is working in our lives. Would you pray with me? Dear Lord, I thank you for the ways that you are always expanding our view of you.

That whenever we try to put you in a box, you will always break forth like a rushing wind. That you will always transform our lives. That there are no limits that we can place on you.

And more than that, that you are always calling us to understand ourselves and our communities more deeply. To understand how you are seen in every person that is walking this earth.

[28 : 43] And I just pray that as we leave this place, that we will understand more fully the power and the glory and the majesty of your presence. That we will feel your love and your comfort as we leave this place.

In Jesus' name, Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen.