

Isaiah 49:13-16 (New Revised Standard Version)

Sing for joy, O heavens, and exult, O earth; break forth, O mountains, into singing! For the Lord has comforted his people, and will have compassion on his suffering ones. ¹⁴ But Zion said, "The Lord has forsaken me, my Lord has forgotten me." ¹⁵ Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you. ¹⁶ See, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands; your walls are continually before me.

John 14:15-21 (New Revised Standard Version)

"If you love me, you will keep my commandments. ¹⁶ And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. ¹⁷ This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you. ¹⁸ "I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. ¹⁹ In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. ²⁰ On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. ²¹ They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them."

When a much admired, beloved and respected college professor

learned that his pancreatic cancer would soon end his life,

he initiated what became, "**The Last Lecture Series**".

Since then, at several other colleges and universities,

a professor is selected each year by faculty and students,

to share insights and reflections from their life's journey,

speaking from the premise:

"If you knew that this was the last lecture you would ever give,

your last time and opportunity to address a group of students,

what would you share, what would you want to say to them?

The passage we read from John's gospel

is a part of **the last lecture, the Last Supper teaching of Jesus,**

which includes the promise, vs. 18, "I will not leave you orphaned."

"I will not leave you orphaned", is very personal and intimate language,

a declaration that for the disciples, their last 3-years together

were not primarily about learning more facts and knowledge,

but rather, about building a relationship with Christ.

This is also true for the Christian life, our walk of faith,

for it too is not primarily about acquiring facts and knowledge

about Scripture, church doctrine, or even proper morals...

... but rather,
**the Christian life is a relationship with God through faith,
a living faith derived from God's presence in us and with us.**

That night in the Upper Room, in his **Last Supper lecture**,
Jesus was trying to prepare his disciples for his departure,
for he knew they would feel like orphans, lost and confused,
to them, and **in desperate need**
of reassurance that everything would turn out alright.

afraid of what might happen

Jesus was promising them two important events in the future,
1st, that he would return resurrected on Easter,
and 2nd, the gift of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost.
He's not leaving them orphaned but God's love & purpose will prevail.

Some pastors refuse to mention Mother's Day in Sunday worship,
believing it's just a Hallmark holiday for selling greeting cards,
& just a cultural intrusion & corrupting influence on the Church,
and since Mother's Day isn't mentioned anywhere in the Bible,
it has no place in the life, ministry or worship of the Church.

But I prefer to recognize Mother's Day as an ideal opportunity
to think about God's gracious love, compassion and nurture,
a meaningful way to look deeper into God's purpose & intention,
for in fact, it was God who invented mothers & motherhood.

Mothers are one of the windows through which God chooses to reveal
God's nature and character, his promise and power to bless,
and the Lord's life-sustaining, protecting and nurturing love.
There's far more for us to honor & celebrate on Mother's Day,
than just the fact that most mother's love their children.

Whenever you see the phrase, "Almighty God" in the Old Testament,
it's the normal way to translate from the Hebrew, "**EI Shaddai**"
which literally refers to a mother nursing her child.
It was God's choice to reveal himself through that feminine image.

Now that's not to detract from, "Our Father who art in heaven",
but the Bible does use a number of specifically maternal images
to describe and help us understand the depth of God's love...

... for we find several of both male and female metaphors and imagery
are used in Scripture to describe God's compassion and love for us,
for our God is **far above and beyond** any definition by gender.

And since today is Mother's Day, isn't this a most appropriate time
for us to focus on and consider some of the specifically maternal
images and metaphors that we find being used in God's Word,
for the Bible is rich with various word pictures
that use the finite to help explain the infinite.

For example, **the prophet Hosea** suggests a most remarkable image
to describe the power and intensity of God's love, vs. 13:8
where he compares God to a mother bear robbed of her cubs.

Now one of the most dangerous creatures in all of nature is a
mother bear protecting her young against a perceived threat.
Usually in May or June, and coming just out of winter hibernation,

a mother bear is ravenously hungry, even a little bit cranky,
and can be fiercely aggressive in protecting her young cubs...

... which is why

rangers warn hikers in bear country to make lots of noise,
especially in the Spring, so momma bear isn't surprised,

because the very last

place you ever want to be

is between a mother bear and her young cubs.

The prophet Hosea is saying that in a similar way, God is like
a powerful mother bear fiercely guarding her cubs to illustrate
the ferocious, protective and nurturing love our God has for us.

A friend from Ghana shared a startling photograph on Facebook,
that also included a most remarkable story and explanation.

In the picture, a small impala is looking off into the distance,
surrounded by an aggressive group of hungry cheetahs
with their teeth at her throat about to tear her apart.

The story with the picture, was that pack of snarling cheetahs
had been chasing the mother impala and her two young fawns,
and that the mother deer could have easily outrun them.

But when her two fawns couldn't keep up and were about to get caught,
she stopped and watched them run off into the distance,
sacrificing herself, giving her life to rescue her young.

**Reminiscent of the gracious sacrifice of Jesus in the cross,
today we celebrate the ideal of sacrificial maternal love,
a hope and assurance as Paul describes it in Romans 8:39,**

that nothing in

all creation, will ever separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

**Surely it is a great compliment and honor
to mothers and to motherhood that one of the ways
God chooses to reveal and illustrate the ideal of his love
is through the example of a mother's love, nurture and care.**

Another example is found in the **Isaiah 49** passage we read earlier.

The nation of Israel had long endured the Babylonian Exile,
and the people captive felt rejected and abandoned by God

amid all their

losses, struggles and suffering, vs. 14

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

In answer, in the very next stanza,
against Israel's claim that the Lord has abandoned them,

God responds with a picture drawn from maternal love, vs. 15

Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb?

Even these may forget, **yet I will not forget you.**

Through the prophet, God was assuring the people in exile,

that even if a mother could possibly forget or neglect,

or a mother somehow not fulfill her task of motherhood,

yet most assuredly, God will never abandon - **yet I will not forget you,**

or, just as Jesus declares: **I will not leave you orphaned.**

The next verse in that Isaiah passage

expands on that maternal image of God's steadfast love, vs. 16

See, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands; you are continually before me.

In the original Greek, the word "inscribed"
is literally to carve or cut into the palm of someone's hands.

And if you have ever gotten a sliver or cut across your palm,
then you remember how painful it was every time you moved it,
which was a constant reminder of your wound and where it was.

The Lord's love is described as having each one of us
carved or cut or inscribed into the palm of God's own hand,
which keeps us constantly in mind, it's there for life---
-- and yes, God really loves us each that much.

**When Jesus was crucified, that same image was literally fulfilled,
as the sign of God's love was inscribed into his hands
when the cruel nails were driven in, piercing his flesh.**

Remember that when Thomas doubted, Jesus showed him his wounds,
"Look, see, there, there are the marks of God's gracious love,
yes, right there, still inscribed, carved into my hands"
as the prophet wrote: *See, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands.*

Today, regardless of your own personal experience of motherhood,
good mother, great mother, absent mother or indifferent mother,
yet we all do know what a mother's love is, or should be
as we celebrate that God's love is like that, only more.

And today we give God thanks and we honor those people in our lives
who have demonstrated maternal love and sacrifice to us,
that nurture & power of God's gracious & abiding love for us.

Can a mother's love, patience and comfort ever fail?

Can a mother ever forget and fail or neglect to fulfill motherhood?

Sadly yes. Tragically, yes sometimes it happens.

But the good news is that God's love will never fail...

**... for thanks be to God, who will always find some way to show us love,
some a pathway for compassion to nurture, protect & sustain us,
and who absolutely and abundantly provides for all our needs.**

As the Lord promises in Isaiah 66:13-14

As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you; you shall be comforted ... You shall see, and your heart shall rejoice.

I earnestly hope that this will be a very happy Mother's Day for you,

and, if the commercialized sentimentality of the day

seems to trivialize disappointments or wounds you feel,

that you will find comfort and hope in the promise and truth

that Jesus Christ knows us completely and cares about us,

because our God is wise, compassionate and always loving.

I pray that you may have the power to comprehend ...what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. (Eph. 3:18-19)