

## HOIST ME UP UPON YOUR SHOULDER

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

June 18, 2017

Scripture: Genesis 22:1-14, Luke 15:11-32

There are two hymns in our hymnal, one old and one new that I particularly love. The first is a setting of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, “The King of Love My Shepherd Is.” In spite of the masculine royal reference to “hierarchical sovereignty,” its third verse has a lovely *husbandry* (as in animal *husbandry*) image that I have always found beautiful.

The verse begins,

Perverse and foolish oft I strayed / but yet in love he sought me; / and on his shoulder gently laid, and home, rejoicing brought me. It’s an echo of the prodigal welcomed home. It’s also the story of the one strayed sheep for whom the shepherd leaves the 90 and 9 to go and find.

The other hymn is new, and when we sang it a few weeks ago, I thought, “Oh gee, I wish we’d saved that one for Father’s Day. It’s the one we just sang, “Loving Spirit.” Again, a beautiful, and tender image is expressed in the third verse,

“Like a father you protect me, / teach me the discerning eye, / hoist me up upon your shoulder, / let me see the world from high.”

These are such tenderhearted and loving images of God, photographs that have been in the album a long time but that we have not always taken out and admired or remembered as often as perhaps we could have.

Sometimes in our desire to include all we inadvertently exclude some, and that is not to ignore the fact of male privilege and sexism in our world. But the fathering images of God are important ones and should be swept under the rug any more than the feminine images of God.

Over the past fifty years of Biblical research we have been discovering and delighting in those feminine images, and paid more attention to the language of worship and way in which Jesus related to women which was far more inclusive and respectful than we had noticed before.

God, whom the scriptures describe as being like a hen who gathers her chicks beneath her wings.

All of these images enrich our understanding of God, not in a literal sense, but metaphorically, giving us a more colorful palate from which to paint our portraits of God in our mind.

It’s Father’s Day, and we have six baptisms to celebrate. Not as many as the twelve on Mother’s Day, but still, it’s nice that the church family can celebrate with all our families the fact that we are a part of God’s family.

It is, I have seen so often, not an easy thing to be a father. Like all parenting, mothering and fathering, it is an imperfect art, requiring practice, over time getting better at the thing, and sometimes not so much so.

So much responsibility thrust upon a parent, and so little experience at first. I think of the many images of fatherhood that come to mind. Fathers come in all sizes and ages and temperaments and heaven knows we hear and experience the all too familiar failings and human imperfections of our dads.

There is no instant do-over when a man becomes a father, all the inadequacies as well as the good qualities are still there. Time has made us more honest about the ups and downs of fatherhood, and we have gotten better about allowing the softer side of our fathers to be seen.

I think, for instance about those Subaru commercials where the dad is cleaning out the car and he reaches in for the car seat and his daughter is an infant, and then he reaches in the car again and finds a gum wrapper and he looks around and sees his daughter as a teenager with a sports injury on crutches,

and then he reaches in again, finds some flower petals and remembers her prom, and finally he has keys in his hands and he hands the keys to his daughter who is going off to college. A father may be a father forever, but the growing up years pass quickly.

I have been fascinated in recent years, since smart phones can so easily transmit photographs from anywhere, that I have received several emails showing an exhausted mom holding her newborn, often linked in the same email with perhaps just as intimate and heartwarming a picture with the new dad, bare chested and holding his newborn skin on skin. It's bonding, and it's quite lovely, and it's probably always been a good idea, but not one that was necessarily enacted for others to see until smartphones came to the hospital bedside.

I think of that kind of moment described by Dr. Paul Kalanithi, in his book **When Breath Becomes Air**, when in the birthing room, shrouded in blankets, wracked with pain, sick with cancer, Kalanithi remembers the night of his daughter Cady's birth.

"It's almost time," [the nurse] whispered. She gathered the blankets and helped me to a chair, next to Lucy. The obstetrician was already in the room, no older than I. She looked up at me as the baby was crowning. "I can tell you one thing; your daughter has hair exactly like yours," she said. "And a lot of it." I nodded holding Lucy's hand during the last moments of her labor. And then, with one final push... there she was..."

'Can we put her on your skin, Papa?' the nurse asked me.

"No, I'm too c-c-cold," I said, my teeth chattering. 'But I would love to hold her.'"<sup>1</sup>

Any dad, fortunate to be with a woman bearing his child, has such a privileged place in such holy space. And to think that fathers used to be banished to waiting rooms to await the news of the well-being, the gender, and the health of both mom and child is kind of astounding by today's standards of what is commonplace.

This week, there was this young couple crossing the street near my apartment, one of whom was a dad with one of those baby carriers in front, with the straps over his shoulders, carrying his child, a binky in the baby's mouth, bouncing in that hammock supported by her dad's broad shoulders, her legs dangling free, ready to fly, or dance, or swing, all of which she was good at doing. And the words to that hymn we sang came to mind as I watched that happy child nestled next to her father's heart, "Like a father you protect me, / teach me the discerning eye, / hoist me up upon your shoulder, / let me see the world from high."

One other word about fathering that I want to mention as well and then we need to talk about those Biblical fathers in the lessons today. There are a lot of moms who are both father and mother to their sons and daughters. My mom was that kind of mom, single parenthood thrust upon her when my dad died so early in their life together. So I am thankful for the moms who have hoisted us upon their shoulders, and let us see the world from high.

I chose two lessons about fathers from scripture for us to hear today, neither of which I can give their due, even if I were only preaching on one of them. The stories are those of two very complicated fathers; as if all stories about our relationship with fathers and mothers were not complicated. One story is the story of the father in the parable of the prodigal son, and the other is the story of Father Abraham hiking up Mt. Moriah, holding the hand of his dear and only child Isaac, who was a miracle baby, given the dotage and aged state of his mother and dad when he was born... Abraham whom God had directed to offer as a living sacrifice. Two of the most difficult, tender, troubling and yet inspiring stories in the Bible. Neither of the fathers in these stories fits a predictable mold.

In the parable of the prodigal, the father is oh so human and makes many mistakes. His first mistake is that he gives his younger son a portion of his inheritance while his old man is still living, an allotment that he didn't deserve during his father's lifetime.

Then the father allows the boy to run off and waste his money, and even to live among loose

friends, and hogs which no self-respecting Jewish son would do, and after all the money was gone, the worst thing of all happens, the father welcomed home the prodigal with a party ignoring the disgrace the prodigal had brought upon his family, a party that outraged his elder brother.

And Abraham? Abraham in his old age was finally given posterity in the form of a child when all hope of a child was practically gone. Isaac, the son whom Sarah and Abraham had hoped for, and longed for, and been promised.

This only child... this child of the promise... is seen climbing the mountainside, trudging to keep up with Abraham, and who, once they reach a stopping point asks his dad if they are going to make a sacrifice, where is the lamb who will be slaughtered, evidently not noticing the knife tucked into the folds of his father's robe.

This is the stuff of which horror movies are made; mad father takes his son to the slaughter to appease a bloodthirsty god. Except that that is not how this story ends. Abraham is willing to do all that God requires, even sacrifice his son; but at the last minute, with a knife held high over the boy who is tied to the altar, God stops the insanity and provides a ram for the slaughter in place of the son. And even so we are left wondering what kind of father lets things go that far?

Two imperfect fathers, both lifted up in the Bible as *faithful* men, and in so being, blur the lines between what is good and what is not, as a faithful father. Of course, all the stories in the Bible about fathers show a certain imperfection, a certain vulnerability, skin on skin, inadequately prepared for all the privileges and responsibilities thereunto appertaining.

I'm grateful to Tom Long for pointing out the complexity of our expectations of God as our Father our heavenly Parent.<sup>2</sup>

God loves all of us, we say, but that is not all for which we are hoping. The truth is that what we most want to know is whether God loves us, particularly. It is not enough to know that God loves humanity. We want to know if God loves us, me, you, knowing what we know about ourselves?

As the Jewish theologian Michael Wysgorod rightly insisted, the biblical story is not about a God who smiles benignly and impartially toward all humanity but instead about a God who falls in love with Abraham, Abraham in particular, and who loves Abraham and his children above all others." And why? "For the sheer love and delight of it. Because God is love and love is particular.

"We love a God who loves passionately and with particularity and we expect and want God to favor us. Can we talk here?

Let me see if this helps. Long tells a story about an ethicist colleague with whom he had a disagreement. The colleague was making the case for a certain form of equity justice, namely that a truly just society is one in which justice is like the blindfolded statue and every person is treated exactly the same. She backed up her argument by telling about an incident with her two young children.

When she discovered them fighting over a candy bar, she told her older child to divide the candy bar in half, one piece for herself and one for her sister. When the older child did as she was told, mom then invited the younger sister to pick which of the two pieces of the candy bar she wanted for herself. It was a nice solution since the one doing the dividing was not the one doing the picking, thus putting incentive in the system to be completely fair in doing the dividing.

But Tom Long argues, "That may work for dividing Hershey bars and Social Security benefits, but it is less successful in plumbing the character of human need and desire. At our depths, we do not desire to be treated with impartial indifference; we wish to be known, understood, treasured, treated as we are in our particular humanity."

After all, Tom Long continues, my colleague does not show her love to her children "blindly and equally, dividing things right down the middle, but very particularly."

“If one of them has the flu, she does not desert her bedside after 45 minutes in order to give precisely equal time to the other. If one of them comes home from school crying because the ‘popular’ girls fenced her out, she is the daughter who gets that day an extra helping of motherly affection.

In the law courts and other public spaces, we may desire that justice wear a blindfold, impartially dispensing benefits in equal portions. But we want parents – and we want God as our parent, God as our Father/Mother – not to wear blindfolds, but instead to see us in all our needs and particularities with the eyes of tenderness and love.”<sup>3</sup>

The psychologist Haim Ginot tells a story of a boy named Andy who asked his father, “What is the number of abandoned children in Harlem.” And the father pleased at his son’s social conscience Googled the factoid. But Andy had more questions. How many abandoned children in New York City? In the United States? In Europe? In the world?

It finally occurred to Andy’s father that his son was not concerned so much about a social problem, but for reassurance that he would not be abandoned. And so the father said, “You’re worried that your parents may some day abandon you the way some parents do. But let me assure you that we will never desert you. And if you should ever worry about this again, please tell me so that I can help you stop worrying.”<sup>4</sup>

If your child comes to you and says, “Mommy, Daddy, do you love me?” It would be cold comfort to reply, “Of course, son, I love all children.” It’s not particular enough, it doesn’t meet our emotional, spiritual needs.

Someone has written, “This is similar to why many in the ‘Black Lives Matter’ movement resist the substitution of the seemingly more inclusive ‘All Lives Matter.’ ‘Black Lives Matter’ is a cry for justice when black women are escorted from stores because they were shopping while black, when black young adults get overlooked in the job market, and when unarmed black men get shot in the back by police. ‘All Lives Matter’ may be philosophically true, but in operation it can become a license for indifference and for ignoring the great disparities in our society.”<sup>5</sup>

I have good news for you today. The God we long to love us is precisely the God who loves us, like a shepherd who so loves the one, that he will leave the 90 and 9 and risk everything to go and find us, every one of us, and bring us home, on his shoulders gently laid, rejoicing.

This is the same God who watches for us and waits patiently for us when we have run away and blown the money and ruined our reputation, yearning for us all this long while. The God who hoists us up upon his shoulder, and lets us see the world from high.”

It is always in the particular that God’s love as a father, as a mother, as a divine parent is expressed for us or else we would never know it. And we do know it in the love of one who was hoisted up upon a cross and who sees the world from on high, skin against wood, love for love, the dearest and most loving of God’s love that we can know.

Hoist us all up, dear God, so that we may see you and see each other as you do on high.

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Kalanithi, **When Breath Becomes Air**. New York: Random House, 2016. p.195

<sup>2</sup> I have borrowed liberally, and indicated directly when I am quoting Thomas G. Long’s article in the Pentecost 2017 issue of **Journal for Preachers**, Vol XL, Number 4. *Journal for Preachers*: Montreat, NC, 2017.

<sup>3</sup> Long, p. 21.

<sup>4</sup> Long, p. 22.

<sup>5</sup> Long, p. 22.