

The King of Zion and the Epicenter of God's Salvation

The Book of Isaiah

God's Motherly Love, and Ours

Isaiah 49:13 – 23

Mako A. Nagasawa

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Introduction: Motherhood in the COVID Pandemic

So it's Mother's Day – we honor those of you women who are mothers in a biological or spiritual sense. Whether you have brought children into the world and raised them, or mentored others and invested in the next generation, we honor you and thank you. Since I am not a mother – I know, that a shocker – I thought I would approach today by doing my best to appreciate mothers, and appreciate the vocation of motherhood.

Before this pandemic, mothers did not have an easy job. The pandemic made it crazy! First, you had to educate yourselves about the coronavirus. Who is most vulnerable? Where is it spreading now? Then you had to explain to your kids what was going on. Then you had to help your kids be careful. And then if your kids did get COVID, you had to help them not freak out!

Many of you moms had to juggle working at home and helping your kids get online for online school. Then you had to look for a room to have your Zoom meetings. How many of you had a Zoom meeting in the bathroom? “What do you mean you need to use the toilet? Can't you see this is my office?”

Then, you moms had to become your kids' best friends because who else could they play with? I know grandma Maria you had that job, too. “Why do we have to stay home? Why can't we have a birthday party?”

You could be the mom of older kids or adults, and the pandemic may have put some extra stress into you, and stress onto your relationship. “What do you mean, you're going out? With who? Do they wash their hands? What do you mean, you're going to be in the same car?!”

You might be a mentor, which is mom-like at times. You may be a supervisor, like Michelle – you started supervising a new team during the pandemic; that's a hard mentoring job. Or you're teachers. Nakia even started a school during this pandemic. You learned how to wear the mask and smile just with your eyes, or give the evil eye.

Several women here gave birth to a child during the pandemic. Kelly, Kim, our friends Tanisha (Nov 2020), Edyne (June 2021), and Noa (Jan 2022). In early 2020, I remember our friends Tiffany and Kesha had babies right when the pandemic broke out. Back then, as a society, we didn't even know anything about the virus. How is it bringing little people into the world wondering if the hospital is even safe?

Relevance

And that is a big part of the vocation of motherhood. And we're going to reflect on these experiences of motherhood and see how God says that God is a mother to us. God is the source of motherhood just as God is the source of fatherhood. And that's important because that we can laugh now at some of these pandemic-related things. But the truth be told, these are still scary times. Wages aren't keeping up with gas prices or housing prices. Putin might use nuclear weapons.

How do we bring new people into a world like this? How do we nurture and develop them? What does motherhood even mean? What does spiritual motherhood mean in a world like this? When we are nurturing and developing other people spiritually?

Text and Context

We're going to look at God as a mother in the book of Isaiah. Isaiah was a prophet in Israel about 800 years before Jesus. He looked ahead and saw that because the people of Israel turned away from the one true God who was Creator and Redeemer, and trusted in the idols and kings of other nations, that they would be taken over by those nations. King Nebuchadnezzar of the Babylonian Empire would come and destroy Jerusalem, burn the holy Temple

to the ground, and force march the Jewish population on their own trail of tears, hundreds of miles away. Most went to the city of Babylon where they had to live as an oppressed minority. Later they would come back to broken down cities, like certain parts of Ukraine today. And although they'd rebuild, they would live as an occupied people.

Isaiah 40 – 66 is the part of Isaiah where God promises His people, His children, new beginnings. And because of that, God compares himself to a mother more often than in any other part of Scripture. He uses words like

Mother: 49:1; 50:1 (x2); 66:13
Woman: 42:14; 45:10; 49:15; 54:1
Womb: 44:2; 44:24; 46:3; 49:1, 5, 15; 66:9
Beget/Begotten: 45:10; 49:21
Birth: 45:10; 46:3; 48:8 – 9
Breasts: 60:16; 66:11
Nurse/nursing: 40:11; 49:15; 49:23; 66:11; 66:12
Bosom: 40:1; 49:22; 65:7 – 8; 66:11
Child/children: 49:15, 20, 21; 54:1; 57:4 – 5; 65:23
Offspring: 42:5; 43:5; 44:3; 45:19, 25; 48:19; 53:10; 57:3 – 4; 59:21 (x3); 61:9 (x2); 65:9, 23; 66:22
Beginning: 40:21; 41:4, 26; 46:10
New strength: 40:31; 41:1
New thing/s: 42:9; 48:6
New heavens/earth: 65:17; 66:22
New moon: 47:13; 66:23 (x2)
New song: 42:10
New name: 62:2
New wine: 62:8; 65:8
Widow: 47:8; 47:9; 54:4 – by contrast, as a woman bereaved of children or vulnerable

In this section, God is making promise after promise, painting one beautiful picture after another, so the people have a big picture vision of what God will do. And it is about God's motherly love. I'm going to look at Isaiah 49:13 – 23. There are three parts: God's faithful motherly love in v.13 – 15, the evidence for God's motherly love in v.16 – 17, and God's enabling motherly love in us in v.18 – 23.

God's Faithful Motherly Love: v.13 – 15

What is both touching and challenging about this section is that Now into this mess, God says this.

¹³ Shout for joy, O heavens! And rejoice, O earth!
Break forth into joyful shouting, O mountains!
For the LORD has comforted His people
And will have compassion on His afflicted.

This is great news! But it doesn't seem great yet. The issue here is timing. In the previous chapters of Isaiah, God has said Jerusalem will be rebuilt, restored, renewed. This people in it will be redeemed, restored, renewed. So in v.13, God calls heaven and earth to rejoice and shout. God has said it so it's as good as done. Because when God makes a promise, He is faithful. He will keep His word.

But, the people in Zion, in v.14 say:

¹⁴ But Zion said, 'The LORD has forsaken me,
And the Lord has forgotten me.'

In other words, we don't see it yet. We don't feel comforted.

We live in that same tension. God has really promised to rebuild, restore, renew all creation. And Jesus has done that in his own humanity first, so he could do that in us by his Spirit, and we partner with him in the now. But there are always setbacks and challenges. So it's easy for us to say also, "God, You've forsake us, forgotten about this planet. We're still here!"

How does God respond to us? Well to the Israelites, God says, “I am your mother, and more than your mother.”

¹⁵ Can a woman forget her nursing child
And have no compassion on the [child] of her womb?
Even these may forget,
But I will not forget you.

God’s people say, “You, God, have forgotten me. You’ve forgotten us.” God says, “It’s like you’re nursing at my breast. Like at this very moment. That’s the connection we have. You are connected to Me. And you came from Me. I gave birth to you. I have not forgotten you. I will not. Even on the human level, in some extreme situations sometimes mothers do forget, so there is a limit to every metaphor. And if your human mother was a woman who did forget you in some way, we stand with you in grief. But I will not forget you,” says God. “I am not like that.”

Now back then, it was typical for mothers to breastfeed their children until the children were three years old. So it’s not just a helpless baby nursing at the breast that we’re talking about. We should probably think about toddlers, little ones who have started talking, walking, even running, and also falling down. Tripping. Bumping into things. Skinning their knees. So translate that into Israel’s wait for restoration from exile, and also our experience here and now waiting for the full restoration from exile.

Illus: When I was a toddler, I got this scar over my left eye because I hit my face against the edge of a table, and I needed stitches. When I was a little older, I rode my bike and skateboard without a helmet. Back then, no one wore a helmet. So it was no surprise that I was crouching on my skateboard, hit one of those sidewalk cracks, and scraped my nose on the sidewalk. A mother will not stop her child from doing every single thing. But mom will be there to help us heal and learn from it.

That is what God is saying here. It’s like you’re still at the age of nursing. You made a mess. I will help you clean up the mess. You hurt yourself. I will be here to help you heal. And I will be with you as the pain subsides. And the pain will subside. You are safest with Me.

Evidence for God’s Motherly Love: v.16 – 17

Now the Israelites were probably asking, “What’s the proof, God? How can you say that?” So God gives says:

¹⁶ Behold, I have inscribed you on the palms of My hands;
Your walls are continually before Me.
¹⁷ Your builders hurry;
Your destroyers and devastators will depart from you.

God says two basic things, that are linked. First, I always think of you as if your names were tattooed on my hands, or written on my hands in some way. As often as I turn my hands face up, I see your name and I think of you. In fact, these marks are somehow permanent, so God is permanently impacted by us. This became physically true when God took on human flesh from the womb of Mary, and kept that human body, and then kept the scars on his hands from the cross. God has permanently been impacted by us. So that’s point number one.

Point number two is that God is laying the foundation for your life. The city walls were being rebuilt. The builders hurry. Your return home – God is getting it ready. Not everything is finished yet. But the protection is being built. The harmful ones will leave. And that is also true in Christ. Christ is the foundation for our lives. He is the place where we are protected from the enemy. It’s true that there is still a spiritual war going on. There are other conflicts outside. But in Jesus Christ we find God’s protection.

If you want evidence of God’s motherly love, we look at Jesus. We are so deeply connected to him that we are “in him,” by his Spirit. The very womb of God is Jesus. The body that bears us is Jesus.

God Enabling Motherly Love in Us: v.18 – 23

And then the so what. The third section: God enables motherly love in us. Again, the city of Jerusalem is personified as a woman, as a mother.

¹⁸ Lift up your eyes and look around;
 All of them gather together, they come to you. [You, Zion, will have your children again]
 As I live,' declares the LORD, 'You will surely put on all of them as jewels
 And bind them on as a bride. [They will be precious and you will be proud]
¹⁹ For your waste and desolate places
 And your destroyed land—
 Surely now you will be too cramped for the inhabitants,
 And those who swallowed you will be far away.
²⁰ The children of whom you were bereaved
 Will yet say in your ears,
 'The place is too cramped for me;
 Make room for me that I may live here.'
²¹ Then you will say in your heart, 'Who has begotten these for me,
 Since I have been bereaved of my children
 And am barren, an exile and a wanderer?
 And who has reared these?
 Behold, I was left alone;
 From where did these come?'"

Your children will return. And they'll want to be home. And you'll have more children who won't just be running around. They will appreciate you.

Illus: Ming and I have not been bereaved of our children, but one close emotion goes like this. It means a lot to Ming and me that our kids have gotten older and want to have their friends come over. John wanted his old high school friend to live with us for a few months. This friend was depressed and had a tough home life. Zoe wanted her new college friends to come home with her on her birthday so we could sit by the fire together.

So this maternal feeling is when our children want to be home, and want others to be there, too. Jerusalem will be reunited with her children in an even deeper way, because she didn't just graduate her kids to the next stage of life. She was bereaved. They were clawed away. But God will bring them back. And Jerusalem will be a mother again. Why? Because God has been a mother for far longer. God's motherly love makes space for us to experience motherly love.

²² Thus says the Lord GOD, 'Behold, I will lift up My hand to the nations
 And set up My standard to the peoples;
 And they will bring your sons in their bosom,
 And your daughters will be carried on their shoulders.
²³ Kings will be your guardians,
 And their princesses your nurses.
 They will bow down to you with their faces to the earth
 And lick the dust of your feet;
 And you will know that I am the LORD;
 Those who hopefully wait for Me will not be put to shame.

Illus: It's like all the great parade scenes in Disney movies. It's like the Simba scene in The Lion King when all the animals kneel before Simba. It's like the victory scene in Mulan when all the people bow to honor Mulan.

So yes, those who hopefully wait for God, who wait in hope, will not be put to shame.

God is Sending Truth into the World

That's really important for us because in the bigger picture, God keeps sending His Spirit into the world because He keeps sending His truth into the world. We live in a pandemic of "alternative facts." But God gives birth to people in a spiritual sense, when they have a truth encounter with Jesus. Israel and Jerusalem were outposts that God established in the world. So of course they got attacked. They bore God's truth into the world. Now Jesus has inscribed God's love into his human hands, and God's truth into his human nature, and inscribes himself into us by

his Spirit, so we bear God's love and truth into the world. So we have to constantly raise questions of truth: definitely the truth of Jesus, and at times, other truths, too. Even what does it mean to be a truthful person? So I'm sure there are conversations you look forward to having with people. There are probably conversations you are not looking forward to, but you need to anyway. God bless you in that. God continues to give spiritual birth to people in Christ.

Illus: I recently read a book called *The Three Mothers: How the Mothers of Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, and James Baldwin Shaped a Nation*. It's by Anna Malaika Tubbs. It's about Alberta King, Louise Little, and Emma Berdis Baldwin. Pastor Val read this book, courtesy of Damon Hart, and Val shared it with me. Val said, "I can't imagine a more anxious time than black people living under Jim Crow." And while I cannot say that I understand such a monumental challenge, I can appreciate just a bit more how much courage for each of these women, and I'm sure every black woman in the United States, to give birth to children, trying to invest into them hope that things might change.

One of the most poignant things in the book is the description of Alberta King's funeral and how many people paid tribute to her as a spiritual mother and mentor. She taught people truth. As a young woman, Alberta trained to be an educator and she educated other people her whole life – for example as she served in the NAACP, YMCA, Women's International League, and the National Baptist Convention. She was also a very accomplished musician; not only did she lead the choir at Ebenezer Baptist Church, she taught many people organ and choir direction. She herself was a formidable civil rights activist and leader in the church. She dealt with stresses and losses I cannot imagine. She lost not only her son Martin Luther King Jr in 1968 to a brutal assassination. The next year, her second son and third child Alfred Daniel Williams King, who was also a prominent civil rights leader and minister of the gospel, was found dead in his swimming pool, most likely murdered. Through losses like this, Alberta led her family and church community in grieving and still hoping. She was so formidable as a Christian leader that she was tragically assassinated by a Black Hebrew Israelite in 1974. She was sitting at the organ during a church service, leading her church family in worship. She was leading people in the truth of Jesus. She was a mother to many, because God is a mother to many. At her funeral, where so many paid tribute to her as a spiritual mother, the final words on the program said this:

Servant of God well Done, Rest from you Love employ;
The battle is fought, the victory's won, enter thy Master's joy.
A voice at midnight came, she started up to hear;
A mortal arrow pierced her frame, she fell but felt no fear.
The pains of death are past; labor and sorrow cease;
And life's long war-fare closed at last, her soul is found in peace.
Soldier of Christ, well done; praise be thy new employ;
And, while eternal ages run, rest in thy Savior's joy.¹

God is not done with Alberta King. Amen? Nor is God done with all the spiritual mothers who have gone before us and pointed us to Jesus Christ. Amen? God will raise them up. God will raise up Alberta King, clothed in resurrection glory. And on our pilgrimage to Jesus, enthroned on Mount Zion, she will be among those leading us. And all her losses will be undone.

²² Thus says the Lord GOD, 'Behold, I will lift up My hand to the nations
And set up My standard to the peoples;
And they will bring your sons in their bosom,
And your daughters will be carried on their shoulders.

God's motherly love makes room for our motherly love. To be a spiritual mother, a spiritual mentor, might also include biological children. But it is always about helping people know Jesus, worship Jesus, love Jesus, and partner with Jesus. It is to believe that though the night is upon us, the sunrise comes, that God does not forget you, and that God will remember and resurrect everything that we do that is done in partnership with Jesus.

¹ Anna Malaika Tubbs, *The Three Mothers: How the Mothers of Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, and James Baldwin Shaped a Nation* (New York, NY: Flatiron Books, 2021), 186 – 187.