

## MOTHER HENS, FOXES, AND PROPHETS: GOD'S LOVE IN RESPONSE TO VIOLENCE

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Grace Church in New York  
The Second Sunday in Lent  
March 17, 2019

*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! (Matthew 23:37)*

It's impossible for me to hear and read these words from Jesus about violence against prophets without thinking of Friday's horrific attack on faithful Muslims in New Zealand. 49 people were killed and over 40 more were injured. The suspect filmed his attack and streamed it live on social media. The word "viral" never seemed more appropriate for internet activity. What else but a contagious, terrible virus could cause someone to act out in such violence and to broadcast it, and what else could cause others to share such images around the world?

While the shooter's motives are still not entirely known, this particular outbreak of the virus of human violence seems to have roots in religious and racial prejudice. The gunman spoke of his hate of Islam and immigrants who, according to him, threaten Western civilization with invasion. He said that he wanted to show that even a remote country like New Zealand was affected by "mass immigration." Yet the small Muslim community of 50,000, one percent of the country, exists in harmony with New Zealand's diverse population.

Most people have stood in solidarity with the victims, and the Muslim community in general. After the attack, New Zealand's prime minister said that immigrants, whether Muslim or non-Muslim, "have chosen to make New Zealand their home, and it is their home. They are us."<sup>1</sup>

Additionally, news sources reported that "people across the country were reaching out to Muslims in their communities on social media to volunteer acts of kindness — offering rides to the grocery store or volunteering to walk with them if they felt unsafe. In other forums, people discussed Muslim food restrictions as they prepared to drop off meals for those affected."<sup>2</sup> The tragedy brought out the best in most people. And yet, as the journalist and playwright Wajahat Ali writes, "This attack is a reminder that this dangerous ideology also threatens immigrant communities worldwide, and that it's fueled by leaders around the world."<sup>3</sup>

It's important to remember that none of this is new. Categorizing ourselves based on what we look like, what we believe, and where we come from has been a part of human history from the very beginning. And for thousands of years, the forces of tribalism have been in conflict with voices that call us to a more universal understanding of our shared humanity. The battle is waged within our very own holy scriptures, with prophets like Isaiah imagining a feast for all peoples on the holy mountain, while Hosea compared his people to an adulterous spouse and saying they need to focus on religious and ethnic purity. And in the New Testament, the early followers of

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/reuters/2019/03/16/world/16reuters-newzealand-shootout-reaction.html>

<sup>2</sup> [https://apnews.com/ce9e1d267af149dab40e3e5391254530?utm\\_source=Twitter&utm\\_medium=AP&utm\\_campaign=SocialFlow&stream=top](https://apnews.com/ce9e1d267af149dab40e3e5391254530?utm_source=Twitter&utm_medium=AP&utm_campaign=SocialFlow&stream=top)

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/15/opinion/new-zealand-mosque-shooting.html?action=click&module=Opinion&pgtype=Homepage>

Jesus differed on the question of the universality of the gospel vs ethnic particularity. The argument centered especially around circumcision and dietary laws. Did Gentile converts need to adopt Jewish practices to follow Christ? Ultimately, the big tent camp won the argument, and today we cherish Paul's words that "in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." (Galatians 3:26-28) The universal church would not be based on national or ethnic identity, but the Church would be a new people. The people of God. And yet as Jewish Christians were pushed out of their synagogues, as Christianity attracted more and more Gentile followers, and as Christians gained power in the Roman Empire, eventually the followers of the poor, colonized, Jewish Jesus lost sight of their origins and began to think of being the People of God in a more triumphal way. They began adopting anti-Jewish attitudes, and they marginalized and even persecuted Jews. As Christianity took on various nationalist identities and was used as a tool for the powerful, it became in many instances racist, colonialist, pro-slavery, and less than good news for poor and disenfranchised people. The gospel of Christ became captive to social and cultural forces. Anyone criticizing an entire religion based on acts of extremists needs to look at the log in our collective eye as Christians. Of course, that kind of self-examination is not always comfortable for individuals and societies to engage in, which is why the prophets of the Old Testament were often mistreated.

*It is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem.'*  
*Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it!*

Jesus knew that it was possible for a prophet to die elsewhere. But he was foreshadowing his own death in Jerusalem, and I think, he was pointing to a universal theme through the particularity of the ancestral Jewish capital. As one commentator writes, "Jerusalem was a center of both political and religious power and activity in the days of Jesus, but it refused to heed its prophets, of which Jesus himself was one. It is right, even inevitable, when dealing with this text, to ask about the present. Who or what is the 'Jerusalem' of the day in which one lives?"<sup>4</sup>

In this reading, Jerusalem stands in as a symbol of power in any place and any age. Prophets speak up to power, and very often they pay the price, through imprisonment, beatings, or death. Prophets are not always religious leaders, figures of old, or people we might expect. As part of his lament about Jerusalem and the prophets, Jesus uses an interesting image for himself: "How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!" This is one of the bible's strongest uses of feminine imagery to picture God (Jesus, being, as the church teaches, the incarnation of God). Here, Jesus imagines himself as a mother hen, protecting her little chicks. As Christians, we believe that just as there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, there is neither male nor female. But a whole lot of our language and imagery for God is male and associated with fatherhood. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Our Father in Heaven. Those images are important, but what would it mean for what we think about God and what we think about ourselves as children and images of God if we pictured the Almighty more often as female?

Now, just to make it clear, when I highlight the role of gender in imagining God, I am speaking in broad brushstrokes and in cultural norms. People of any gender can and do exemplify traditionally masculine or feminine characteristics. So, for all us of all genders, what might it mean to imagine God with traditionally feminine characteristics, including motherhood? Perhaps

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<sup>4</sup> Dr. Arland Hultgren, Professor Emeritus Luther Theological Seminary,  
[http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=509](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=509)

we could even look to science and chickens themselves for a clue. Several years ago, researchers in England studying chickens found that “adult female birds possess at least one of the essential underpinning attributes of empathy - the ability to be affected by, and share, the emotional state of another.” When the chicks heart rates increased in distress at a stimulus, the same thing happened to their mothers.<sup>5</sup> While the findings have been contested by some scientists and empathy might not be exactly the right term for the birds’ behavior, we know that mothers, whether human or animals, tend to be fiercely protective of their children. And they are often more attached to their offspring and more nurturing of them than are fathers. Mammalian mothers carry their offspring with them in their bodies until they give birth, and then they continue to nourish them from their bodies after their birth.

In the church, we believe that God is nurturing and that God empathizes with us (and of course fathers love their children, and God as father is a vitally important image), but I wonder how much more we would experience God as love if we imagined God as a mother, as well as a father. And what if we imagined God’s prophets as women and as mothers? We often picture the prophets as angry, usually male, figures speaking up for the cause of righteousness. But if we imagine women in the role of prophet, might that expand our notion of what it means to speak truth to power?

When I think of God as a mother hen, trying to gather her children and warning of the violence that the powerful often inflict on those who speak up, I think about the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo. In the early 1970’s Argentina was wracked by political violence and instability between right wing and left wing factions. A military dictatorship emerged and, supported by powerful figures in the U.S. government, the junta conducted a campaign of state terrorism against its opponents known as the Dirty War. Thousands of activists, largely young people, went missing and were later found to have been murdered. They became known as the *desaparecidos*, the disappeared. On April 30, 1977, 14 frightened and brave mothers marched in Plaza de Mayo, in front of the Casa Rosada presidential palace.<sup>6</sup> The movement grew, and groups of mothers continued marching every Thursday at 3:30 until the end of the regime in 1983. In fact, they continue to march to this day to raise awareness about human right abuses around the world and to make sure that Argentina remembers its history. In the beginning, they marched in the face of lack of international interest, press silence, and the support of much of the country for the dictatorship. And there were consequences. Leaders of the movement were kidnapped and killed. But they continued marching, and pressure mounted from citizens and outside countries for the dictatorship to end. In the years after the transition to democracy, the mothers succeeded in calling for the arrest and trial of hundreds of military officers who were complicit in the disappearances. A sub-group called the Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo also formed to identify the children of disappeared women, who ended up mostly being raised by military officers and their spouses. The grandmothers conducted extensive research and DNA testing in an attempt to reunite the children with their biological families. They gathered their brood under their wings, and in doing so, they helped to bring some measure of justice, forgiveness, and reconciliation to families of victims, of perpetrators, and of those who benefited from the regime.

These women were prophets. They are prophets. And they reflect the image of God as mother hen, gathering her children to herself and warning against the use of unjust power. Few things are as terrible as a parent losing their child. The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo are prophets who call us to remember all of God’s children who have been lost, who have been forgotten, and who have had their futures stolen from them. They remind us that God is a mother who saw her

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.thefreelibrary.com/Mother+hens+'can+feel+their+chicks'+pain'.-a0251104710>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/apr/28/mothers-plaza-de-mayo-argentina-anniversary>

Beloved Child die on a cross and who sees her children die every day from violence, injustice and inequity, and other preventable causes.

They might also remind us that we are children of the same God, born of the same divine womb, and that victims and perpetrators alike are our sisters and brothers. At the Episcopal Church's House of Bishops meeting on Friday, Bishop David Rice of San Joaquin, California--originally ordained in the Anglican Church of New Zealand--rose to quote his former country's prime minister in saying that the victims of attack are the same as us. The bishop asked of his fellow church leaders, "Say that with me. They are us." The bishops responded, "They are us."<sup>7</sup>

Bishop Rice continued, "Our immigrant and refugee sisters and brothers, say it with me, they are us." The bishops: "They are us." "Those who even lose their way and do harm, say it with me, they are us." The response: "They are us."

They are us. Those who seem different from us, those who look different, who act differently, who eat and drink differently, who pray differently, who believe differently. They are us. And the broken people who lash out in hate at difference, who hurt, and who kill...They are us, too. Imagine how God the Mother Hen weeps when one of her children hates or kills another. It doesn't mean we excuse what they do, but we also recognize our common humanity and treat them with the dignity that they don't give to others.

This Lent, as we follow Christ on his journey to the Cross, we are reminded of violence done in the name of God and of Empire. Christ died because he loved us and wanted to save us from ourselves, from our thirst for power, domination, and violence. But Christ also rose for us, to give us new life in his Resurrection. As we confront the evil forces of this world which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God, we know that hate and death will not win. Life will win. Love will win. As our Presiding Bishop Michael Curry said last year, "unselfish, sacrificial, redemptive love changes lives, and it can change this world...When love is the way, we know that God is the source of us all, and we are brothers and sisters, children of God, my brothers and sisters, that's a new heaven, a new earth, a new world, a new human family."<sup>8</sup>

Here at Grace Church, we are doing our small part to build a new human family. We have partnered with an Islamic service organization, Who is Hussain, to sponsor and renovate a house with Habitat for Humanity. Many of you have supported this work with your time, resources, and prayers. And if you haven't yet had a chance, I hope you can join us for one of our upcoming volunteer days or for lunch with members of the Who is Hussain community two Sundays from now. Together, we are reaching out in love to create an affordable home for a family, and as we do so, we are building bridges between our two religious traditions.

The virus of violence will be stopped by the antidote of love. Love of our friends and family, love of our neighbors, and love of our enemies. After all, loving our enemies is the only way that they'll change. So, today, in the wake of a terrible act of violence, done out of hatred, let our response be love. Love of our Muslim sisters and brothers, love of immigrants and refugees, and yes, even love of those who hate.

Amen.

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<sup>7</sup><https://www.episcopalnewsservice.org/2019/03/15/bishops-object-to-the-archbishop-of-canterburys-decision-to-exclude-same-sex-spouses-to-2020-lambeth-conference/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2018/05/20/612798691/bishop-michael-currys-royal-wedding-sermon-full-text-of-the-power-of-love>