

God the Father

How would you describe God? Think about it: what phrases do you use? God is my rock, a mighty fortress. The Lord is my shepherd. The Lord is my light. For millennia people have been trying to use metaphor to get at one aspect of God or another, like a spaceship trying to understand a new phenomenon by circling from a distance.

Or, how many of you thought of “God the Father?”

Jesus spoke of God as father all the time. He used the Aramaic word *Abba* which really is closer to Daddy, to demonstrate the dynamics of this trusting relationship. Abba has power, Abba is in control, Abba is loving.

“God the Father”—that can be a tough one, can’t it? What you think of this image probably depends on what you think of your dad. If you were raised by parents who loved and supported you, then you might be very happy to pray “Our Father who art in heaven.” If your relationship with your parents was challenging—or harmful (abusive, manipulative)—or nonexistent, you might run screaming in the other direction. Calling God “the Father” could really challenge your faith. I have friends in both categories.

Or, you might get caught up with the gender thing. God isn’t male. God isn’t female. God’s bigger than that, but it’s easiest to just pick a pronoun. And yes, there are female images of God in the Bible. My favorite is from Matthew chapter 23. It’s three days before Jesus is put to death, and he’s in the temple prophesying, calling out against injustice—one of the speeches that probably got him on the local authority’s hit-list. He says,

“Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing.”

I love the image of God as a mother hen, or maybe even a mother tiger, protecting her young.

So, as a kid growing up in the church, not knowing a great deal about, say, shepherds, I connected most strongly with the idea of God as a supreme parent. I’m lucky to have amazing parents who modeled for me what love looks like.

Understandably, I only thought of the parent-child relationship from a child’s point of view. God was bigger than I was. God knew more. God, like my parents, was around long before I was born and remained awake long after I went to bed.

Now I’m a mom, and all of the sudden, I have a perspective on the parent side of the relationship. I realize that, after a mere 3 ½ years as a mother, I am one of the *least* qualified people in this room to be talking about parenting. But I’ve been reflecting a lot in that time on what it means to be a parent and the phrase “God the Father”—or Mother—actually tells us about the character of God. And so, here’s a top-five list, filtered through my own specific human experience, but still, by the grace of God, I pray, containing a nugget of truth.

Top Five Realizations about Abba God, from a Mother of a Three Year-Old

1. **You can’t shock God with your behavior.**

I remember telling a bold-faced lie to my parents when I was about five. What I actually said doesn't matter—suffice to say, it involved a brownie, and I wanted more. But at the time it felt like that lie emerged from my lips with big neon arrows pointing to it. The world shifted, and I thought, “I can never tell my parents that what I just said wasn't true. They would be shocked.”

Now that I'm a parent, you know what? That grand deceptive lie of mine—my parents saw it coming a mile away. It didn't even make them blink. Even though I was knowingly trying to deceive them to their faces, my behavior did not change the way they felt about me. Not one iota.

And think about it: if God has been God for the entirety of human existence, God's seen it all. No matter what you've thought, what you've done, what horrifying private or aching public hell you've been through, you can't shock God. I mean, have you read the Old Testament? Noah passed out drunk; Abraham lied and was willing to let Pharaoh sleep with his wife to save his own hide; Jacob cheated his brother out of his inheritance—with his mother's help; Joseph's brothers sold him into slavery; and that's only selections from Genesis. None of these behaviors prevented these people from being beloved by God. God's seen it all, and God can forgive it all.

2. God has a different perspective than you.

You know the joke, that with God a minute is like an eon and a million dollars is like a penny. So one day a man says to God, “Please give me a penny.” And God says, “Sure, wait a minute.”

I know more than my daughter. I have a greater understanding of time, of cause-and-effect. A greater capacity to wait. I'm not saying God looks at us all like we're three year-olds, but really, it could be worse.

During my last semester of college, when I was intensely concerned about what would come after graduation. My friends started saying “Here comes Emily—no one say the “f” word”—the F-word being “future.” I wanted to work with refugees, and I wanted to be a poet, and I just didn’t know which I should do first. In my 21-year-old mind, I had the rest kind of figured out, but the order caused me serious, almost clinical, anxiety.

I went on a prayer retreat, which I highly recommend, and at some point toward the end, I heard God speak to me. It’s only happened twice in my life so far. Both times, even though the words were utterly clear in my mind when I heard them, I have never been able to repeat the exact phrasing, because God is bigger than that. And what God said was something along the lines of “I have it under control.” It wasn’t an answer to the question. But it was all the answer I needed.

And along those lines, I should say that I’ve had many opportunities so far to pursue both of those passions, in ways I couldn’t have anticipated at 21. Currently, my love of creative writing and my passion for social justice meet in my work as a radio producer. Later, it might look different. God has more perspective than we do.

3. Like a parent, God wants good things for you.

I want every good thing in the world for my child. Heartless mutants aside, wanting the best for your children is basically part of the human condition. Who do you think put that there?

But it’s hard, too, when I say this, because of course terrible, terrible things happen for reasons we can’t understand, and I am utterly unequipped to explain them. I’m not even going to try, and I’m certainly not going to espouse some kind of prosperity Gospel whereby “true” believers are rich and healthy, because that’s frankly unchristian. Jesus pretty much promises

that if you follow him, there will be suffering. But, in his beautiful sermon up on a mountain, in Matthew 7, Jesus also says this,

“If your child asks for bread, do you trick him with sawdust? If he asks for fish, do you scare him with a live snake on his plate? As bad as you are, you wouldn’t think of such a thing. You’re at least decent to your own children. So don’t you think the God who conceived you in love will be even better?”

4. God delights in you.

One of the most amazing things in the world—and this is the ultimate hubris, but again I think it’s universal to the human condition—is seeing yourself reflected in your child. Recognizing that your child has your eyes, your spouse’s forehead, your mother’s chin, your gestures. By means that we completely understand—and still kind of don’t—your child is clearly made in the image of you and your co-parent—and yet completely her own unique self at the same time.

You know that phrase “face only a mother could love?” Yeah, it’s true of God too. Because—in ways that I can’t explain—we are made in the image of God. Any love in the world, any kindness, generosity, compassion, any righteous anger, any hunger for justice, and desire to protect the weak—those are reflections of God. We are made in God’s image, and God delights in us.

5. God loves you simply because you exist.

If this sounds repetitive from number 4, well, it’s worth repeating. God’s love for you is fact, immutable. Bad behavior doesn’t change it. Good behavior, while always appreciated, doesn’t make you more loved.

You can't change God's love for you, any more than you—parents in the room—could stop loving your children.

And so there you have my top five realizations about God, thusfar, from being a parent. You can't shock God. God has more perspective than you do. God wants good things for you. God delights in you. God loves you because you simply exist.

I realize the flaw in this whole premise. I'm taking human feelings and emotions, very much filtered through my white, Anglo-Saxon Protestant American experience, and laying them upon God who—and by now it should sound like a chorus—is bigger than that. But we understand God through our experiences. And being a mother has given me one more angle of understanding to approach God, even if my prayers happen oh-too-quickly while supervising bath time and making pb-and-js.

You all, with your experience, have more wisdom. Different wisdom, when it comes to understanding and worshipping God. This church would love to hear it.

May we pray?

God, you are bigger than our understanding, bigger than any words we might use to describe you. We thank you that we are made in your image. With our children, with our parents, and in all our relationships, help us to love as you love. Amen.