

# Abba

From the series: Images of God in the Stories of Jesus

*Text: Mark 1:35*

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*Transcription of the spoken sermon*

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Images fill and shape the landscape of our lives. More than theoretical or abstract philosophical principles or statements of truth, we are shaped by stories, by pictures, by images, by metaphor. Metaphor is something with which we all live. We make metaphors constantly. Metaphor--the word itself comes from two Greek words. *Meta* is a preposition, which means across or behind or over. And *pherein* is a Greek verb, which means to carry or to bear. Thus a metaphor carries one across or over the gulf of unknowing. That which is not accessible to us in our ordinary understanding is made accessible to us through metaphors, which are created out of familiar experiences in terms of which we speak of the mystery beyond us.

God is the great Mystery beyond us. The Mystery that confronts us, that embraces us, toward Whom we grope and yearn and long. We speak of familiar things, thereby to relate to the God beyond our experience. We *experience* God through the knowledge of those common things, analogies that help us to know something of the Mystery of God.

Jesus spoke in stories and pictures, images, metaphors. In fact we might say that Jesus was God's living metaphor, enfleshed. "The word became flesh and dwelt among us," so that our hands handle him; our ears hear him; our eyes look upon him--the Word of Life. Jesus said, "If you have seen me you have seen the Father." Paul said, "We have seen the light of the revelation of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ." God has drawn close to us and drawn away the veil for us in the metaphor that is Jesus. It is the only way we can have true knowledge or experience of God: through an image or a metaphor. And so, in these next weeks, I want us to look at *the images of God in the stories of Jesus*.

But I am not going to begin this morning with a story that Jesus told. I am going to begin with a portrait of Jesus that Mark paints for us - of Jesus before the break of day, in a lonely place--praying to God. As we see Jesus there, we see him embodying for us his knowledge and understanding of his relationship with God, of who he was for him.

Have you been to Palestine? Imagine the hills overlooking the Sea of Galilee, Jesus slipping away quietly before dawn. Mark tells us that the previous day had been filled with ministry. In the old King James translation of the Bible, the Gospel of Mark has that word straightway. Straightway he did this and straightway he did that, and straightway he did another thing. In the RSV the word is immediately. Immediately, immediately, immediately. And if you follow long enough in the Gospel of Mark you are almost out of breath, because he takes you on such a torrid pace. And such had been the pace of Jesus that previous day. I've had those kinds of days. But after they are over and I am drained, I try to sleep in the next morning! Not Jesus. A great while before dawn he's off. By himself in a lonely place, he prays to gather his thoughts and let the serenity of the place wash over him. Becoming centered, he opens his life in the presence of the Mystery that is God. He begins his communing with God very simply: "*Abba*."

It was, in Jesus' day an affectionate address for a parent. Daddy. Papa. It was as a child's word, and in Jesus' day it was rather common parlance, an affectionate term for a father. What was unique was that Jesus used that simple unaffected word of address to address God. *That* was not common. It may in fact have been non-existent except for Jesus' usage.

The rabbinical devotion of Jesus' day gives little indication that anyone in Jewish piety would have thought to address God simply as Papa. But the NT scholar, Edward Schillebeeckx, says that the whole essence of Jesus' life and ministry is summed up in that word of address. That simple straight-forward, intimate, unaffected word of address, *Abba*. And although *Abba* is transliterated in our New Testament in only three places, (in the Gospels, the Gospel of Mark, and in the Garden of Gethsemane: "Abba, Father, now is my soul troubled."); nonetheless, wherever "Father" appears in the Gospel as an address to God, in the words of Jesus or the prayer life of Jesus, the word behind it was *Abba*. It so impressed the New Testament community that Paul, for example, says in Romans 8 that "the Spirit testifies with us that we are the children of God and we pray, *Abba*, Father," and again "in the fullness of time God sent forth his son who has given us his Spirit whereby we cry *Abba*, Father." The early church was indelibly marked by that simple, unaffected, straight-forward, intimate, personal address of Jesus to God. The word for Jesus bespoke a conception of God as the solid undergirding of life, the one who secures and guides and counsels, the one who nurtures and provides and sustains.

Jesus in using *Abba* revealed the conviction that was the whole center of his life--that God was like a parent, a good parent who could be trusted. *Abba*. "Abba in heaven, hallowed be thy name." "Abba, now is my soul troubled." "Abba. Why have you forsaken me?" "Abba, forgive them, they don't know what they are doing." "Abba. Into your hand I commend my Spirit." Jesus' understanding and relationship to God can be summed up in that simple word of address. His was a confident resting in the goodness, the compassion, the grace of God, related to as a loving, faithful, trustworthy parent.

In his day Jesus was unique in using Abba, but he could point to a long, Scriptural tradition when he prayed thus, prayed intimately to God in that personal manner.

Psalms 103 is one of the most beautiful expressions of such intimate relationship in the Old Testament. In verses 13 and 14 we read, “as a father pities his children, so the Lord pities those who fear him, for he knows our frame, he remembers that we are dust.” God doesn’t expect us to be more than we are. God knows what we are. To be human is enough. God loves us. The compassion of God is ours as a father has compassion on his children. The word compassion in the Hebrew is *rechem* and that word has a root that means “womb.” The description of God as a compassionate father is really a maternal image that comes from the idea of womb – the womb, that place that is warm and secure and life-sustaining. God’s compassion, God’s mercy is compared to the warmth and nurture of the womb. The 8th verse speaks of God as being merciful and gracious, the word gracious is also in the Hebrew a maternal word.

Samuel Terrien, an Old Testament scholar, speaks of being in those biblical lands and talking to a sheik who was herding camels. He heard the yearning cries of camels off in the distance and he asked, “What is that cry?” The sheik answered that those particular camels had recently borne young and the young had forcibly been removed in order to wean them. The cries of those mother camels conveyed their yearning for their young.

The word “gracious” used of God in Psalm 103, verse 8, is the same word as that used for the maternal longing for young that have been forcibly separated. The womb. The maternal longing. This is the imagery of the compassionate father who has mercy on his children.

The Old Testament is really saturated with the intimate and personal images of fatherhood and motherhood--beautiful images. In Isaiah 49:15, for example, Zion has said, “The Lord has forsaken me. My Lord has forgotten me.” To which the response is, “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.” A mother nursing a child whom she has borne, how could she forget? But, if she could forget, yet I will never forget. And in Isaiah 66, “As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you. You shall be comforted in Jerusalem.” Images of a good trustworthy parent. Mother love. Father love. The nurturing, sustaining, life sustaining, guiding, counseling love and grace of a good parent is used as a metaphor to help us understand the nature of God.

So in that quiet place, alone with God, Jesus says, “Abba.” Although taking privileges no pious Jew dare take, Jesus trusts the more ancient sense, and reflects in that word, the deep, rich Hebrew tradition of faith in the God of steadfast love -trustworthy, covenant keeping, full of grace.

Another image, perhaps the most beautiful and familiar image is the image of the Good Shepherd. It is interesting to note that that image has transcended its locale of origin. How many of you have seen a shepherd? Well maybe you have; perhaps you have been to Palestine, and seen a shepherd out on the hills with a flock of sheep, guiding them to pasture, protecting, keeping. David, purportedly the author of the 23rd Psalm, records his powerful metaphorical insight, "The Lord is my shepherd." He was using that which was most familiar to him out of his daily experience, and therein conjured up this beautiful image that still today moves us and will move future generations as well, thanks to Colette's Worship Center, the fundamental image of which is the Good Shepherd. Rather interesting though, isn't it? In a scientific day, technological society, a day of computers, computer chips, and space travel we can be moved by "The Lord is my shepherd." A hundred years ago when I was in Sunday School they used to pass out Sunday School papers, and I remember the picture of the Good Shepherd, Jesus, with the lamb in the crook of his arm. I wonder if that is what causes me to feel warm when I think about the Good Shepherd? Whatever it is, that image, that metaphor has been able to transcend its time and its place of origin, and it continues to speak to us. To that extent it is a valuable metaphor, still a meaningful image. God isn't a shepherd, of course, God isn't a father, God isn't a mother. But the imagery conveys God to us, in terms of the familiar that we know, communicates to us the Mystery beyond our ability fully to comprehend.

*We need to continue to find those metaphors and images that will move us. We could take all the metaphors and images of the Bible and scrap them--shepherd--father--mother--king--prince--refiner's fire. We could scrap them all and we wouldn't dishonor God. We wouldn't detract one bit from God. We wouldn't touch God. Because God is not the metaphor; the metaphor is only a figure of speech to help us to reach after and hopefully get in touch with God. But we could by rewriting the metaphors. And probably we should be about that--calling on new metaphors, out of our own experience, our own world. I wonder . . . I wonder if the masses have left the church because there's a musty sound and smell, the language of Zion, all of it from another world, and another time.*

There is a minister in the United Reformed Church of Great Britain, Brian Wren, who believes the church can be transformed by poetry. God knows it can't be transformed by theological debate. All we do is choose up sides and then shoot one another. You can't argue rationally the truth of God. But images, stories - they can change us. That is why Brian Wren says poetry can transform the church. And he's done his best. We have printed a couple of his poems in the bulletin. We are going to sing one in a moment, and we have sung another one on occasion. On the cover of the bulletin you will find, "Are You the Friendly God?" I love it. Look at the second line, the image there: "Spirit of brooding ..." At the baptismal font I spoke of the spirit that brooded over the waters of creation, and Brian Wren picks up that biblical image. But he brings it into our own experience. "Hovering wings," again a beautiful, ancient biblical image, yet with a freshness that speaks to us.

And the second line, “Are you the gambler-God...?” Now that should shock you! “... spinning the wheel of creation.” Can’t you see it? Wheel of Fortune! God spinning the wheel of creation. Giving it randomness. Do you recognize that word randomness? Do you read any of the esoteric physics, the cosmology of our day, the physicists who are probing the basic stuff of the universe? They speak about randomness, the randomness of atoms and electrons. Our cosmos is not a machine grinding on its way. There is a certain randomness to life, the physicists tell us. And don’t we know it? Don’t we know it in our own experience? Life isn’t all neat and cut and dried, predetermined. What will happen tomorrow? What decisions will you make? Do you have some freedom to go this way or that? You surely do! Randomness. The image immediately turns me on. This is someone who is talking about the God that is more like my present experience than even the shepherd to be honest with you. God willing to be surprised! “... taking a million chances ...”

But then the third stanza comes back again and reminds us of our deep covenant faith in a faithful God, a God of steadfast love. And how about line two of that stanza, “... quilting our histories.” Come to the Geneva Room on Tuesdays and watch the quilters making their beautiful patterns and see that metaphor enfleshed. “...patching our sins with grace.” Don’t you love that? And the final line, “... all of our ends are wrapped in love’s beginning.” The creator will be the consummator. All of the promises of God will come to fruition.

On the next page, “Name Unnamed.” We’ve sung that one and you know I love it! The second stanza was last week’s sermon, “Spinner of Chaos, pulling and twisting, freeing the fibers of pattern and form . . .” Can’t you see God, as weaver? Don’t you see the tapestry under way? “Nudging Discomforter”--just when we thought we had all the answers, God raises another question. “Straight-Talking lover . . .” “Midwife of Changes . . .” “Dare-devil Gambler . . .” “giving us freedom to shatter your dreams . . .” Has God given us power to shatter God’s dreams? God knows we are able! “Life-giving Loser . . .” In a world that only worships winners, Jesus was willing to come and to be true to God--to lose his life. “...wounded and weeping . . . But not staying there . . . dancing and leaping . . .” in Resurrection’s power; “. . . sharing and caring that heals and redeems.” Ah, there are some images right out of today and this world.

I suppose that one of the images that has been instrumental in transforming more lives in the last century than any other is an image that isn’t really very warm and vivid, but nonetheless it works - the Higher Power. And in the Twelve Step community, AA in its wisdom has refused to put flesh and blood on the Higher Power. It leaves it for people to flesh out individually--people--people like us all, although not all of us know it, but people who have said in all honesty, “my life is out of control.” We then speak of the Higher Power in concrete tangible form--metaphor--speak of the ways it has come to us. Perhaps through the gentle, open acceptance of a child, or in the sound of lapping waves, which seem to connect us with the heartbeat of One larger than ourselves. A metaphor of a

Higher Power as friend, or captain of our Earth Ship, or director of our pluralistic choir. A Higher Power. The point is not the metaphor, it is the power of God, the experience of God. It is God touching our lives. That's what we need. Never argue for a metaphor. Metaphors come and go. They are negotiable. They are transient. They are only good as long as they move us. I don't think we are ever going to be able to reach back and rejuvenate, retrieve *Abba*. When we prayed it together, at the beginning of the Lord's Prayer, as Jesus would have, it (*Abba*) doesn't do it for us, does it? It did it for Jesus. But it doesn't really do it for us in the same way. What will do it for you? What do you need God to be? God *is* --and a whole lot more.

Find that image, that metaphor of God, in which you can rest and taste grace.