

## **Sermon: Mother Eagle, Mother Hen**

Silvia Purdie. 10 May 2015

A sermon for Mother's Day. Isn't it a lovely comforting image, the picture of God lifting us up on eagle's wings? Not so much! God's 'mothering' involves training children for maturity as well as soft comfort and security.

Bible readings: Deuteronomy 32:8-14  
Matthew 23:34 - 24:2

Let's start at the very beginning, a very good place to start ... in this case, the beginning of the nation of Israel. Which, according to the ancient scriptures, was the day that Moses led them out of slavery in Egypt, out into the wilderness ... not a very grand beginning, as beginnings go. Jolly uncomfortable actually, so harsh an environment that before long they were hankering after the relative comforts of Egypt ... even as slaves they had water and food. Perhaps freedom wasn't all it was cracked up to be!

But onward they went, and they found themselves at the foot of a mountain. Mt Sinai. And up Moses went, up the mountain, and there met with the living God, the same God he had met in a different desert, whom he knew as Yahweh, the One who Is, 'I am who I am'.

Exodus 19 tells of this very first climb up the mountain, and the crystal clarity that Moses came back with, the words of God for his people. Here is the beginning of their life as God's covenant people. Here the nation of Israel was born.

Exodus 19: <sup>3</sup> Then Moses went up to God, and the LORD called to him from the mountain and said, "This is what you are to say to the descendants of Jacob and what you are to tell the people of Israel: <sup>4</sup> 'You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself.

Our reading from Deuteronomy tells the same story, in the voice of the temple priests many of hundreds of years later.

The very first way in which God describes himself to his people is as a mother. A mother eagle.

Deuteronomy fills out this picture with more detail: (Deut 32)

<sup>10</sup> In a desert land Yahweh found Israel,  
in a barren and howling waste.

He shielded him and cared for him;  
he guarded him as the apple of his eye,

<sup>11</sup> like an eagle that stirs up its nest  
and hovers over its young,  
that spreads its wings to catch them

and carries them aloft.

There's just one problem with this picture. Eagles don't carry their young on their backs. Not normally. There is only one time in its life when an eagle might be carried on its mother's wings, and it's actually quite terrifying. Let me describe it for you.

Eagles are big birds. The eagles that the Israelites saw in the desert were the largest of all birds. They build their nests high on the faces of cliffs on the mountain side. A mother eagle lays a single chick and sits on it for 3 months, while her partner keeps guard. Then for 3 months after the chick hatches both mother and father eagle are kept busy all day every day catching food for the chick who is hungry all the time. For 3 months the chick stays in the nest, watching its parents swooping off into the distance and returning with good things to eat, and snuggling under mum's warm soft feathers through the cold desert nights.

The baby eagle grows bigger, grows long wing feathers and strong tail feathers ... until one day the parent eagles decide that they have had enough of feeding this demanding bottomless pit, and they literally push it out of the nest.

Deuteronomy says that the mother eagle "stirs up her nest" ... that's what it means. She shoves her baby out off the safe warm ledge, and the young eagle plummets towards the ground. As it desperately tries to figure out what these wing things are for, the mother eagle is diving right beside her child, and before it hits the rocks she swoops under the young eagle so that it lands on her back. Then, with great difficulty I expect, she flies up up up ... and then, in mid air, she tips it off her back. They fall together again, the young eagle flapping wildly, but if it is still falling more than flying, again she will swoop under it to catch it, and again flap her way up high into the air.

This is to me an extraordinary image. What a picture for how God works in our lives! What an image for the birth of a nation. What a metaphor for motherhood.

It sounds so comforting, so nice, doesn't it ... "I carried you on eagle's wings" ... rise up on wings like eagles writes Isaiah ... being carried on the wings of God. It sounds supportive, like we are being kept safe from harm. There are other references through scripture to the mothering wings of God, our Verse for today from Psalm 61 talks about hiding in the shelter of God's wings. Psalm 57 begins:

Have mercy on me, my God, have mercy on me, for in you I take refuge. I will take refuge in the **shadow** of your **wings**

These lovely words, repeated in several Psalms, are a wonderful picture of safety ... which is like the young eagle tucked around with soft down feathers, its mothers wings folded over to keep out cold and rain, with the father eagle standing at the edge of the nest ready to defend against any attack.

That's a big part of mothering isn't it ... warmth, safety, affection food, security, home.

Jesus used this image, of a mother bird keeping her chicks safe under her wings, to describe how he felt towards his people. He knew full well of the threats and coming attacks on Jerusalem and the nation of Israel, and he longed to gather them all to himself, like a mother hen gathers her chicks close to her own body if anything threatened them.

I wonder how you have known the tender care of God in your life. I wonder how Jesus is able to draw you close to himself, so that you can feel his heart beating, so that the troubles of the world fade away and you are simply held in safety.

I wonder how you are able to be like a mother hen to others ... whether your own children or grandchildren, or other people who come to you for acceptance. How do you speak words of grace to others? How do you touch other people with the tender love of God?

But this metaphor from Mt Sinai is not that picture. To talk about being carried on eagle's wings is not warm, safe or secure. It is quite the opposite ... it is a moment of utter terror, of being ejected forcefully from security. God in this picture is making his people find their own wings, is forcing them to grow up, in a hurry! God as the mother eagle is there to catch her young, she lifts them up, carries them safely, but only in order to drop them again into thin air. Again and again, as often as it takes until her child can fly!

And this does describe quite well the experience of the nation of Israel as they were thrown out of their old comforts of slavery, out into desert, out into a stark harshness in which they had to forge new ways of being as a people, so they when they finally arrived in their homeland they had a core identity, no longer slaves, no longer chicks in a nest, but a people fully grown, committed to ways of living together that honoured God and

cared for each other, that rejected injustice, human sacrifice and the worship of idols. This was a long and painful process.

I wonder what you have known of long and painful processes. I wonder when you have felt kicked out of a safe place, and known something of the fear of falling. I wonder how you have had to try your own wings and learn to fly for yourself. I wonder how you have been caught and held and lifted up.

This Mothers Day, then, we honour the God of Israel who brought a people out of slavery into freedom, like a mother eagle who cares so much for her child that she refuses to let him stay a child, but supports him with her very own body until he can fly for himself.

We honour Jesus, who loved his people so much that he gathered them to himself, sacrificing himself for us, opening up the way for us to come to the Father, new born as children of God.

We honour the Holy Spirit who works in us to bring us to maturity in Christ, giving us wings of prayer and worship, lifting us up to life everlasting.

We honour our own mothers

we honour all mothers

we honour the way each of us cares for others, whether we are mothers or fathers or friends.

And so as we prepare to share around this table of family fellowship, we take up our offering as a sign of all we bring. and sing, of course, Eagles Wings ...