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They Call Me Mother

Pamela Loughton¹

Jeremiah 1:4-10

They call me *mother*. My best work has, without question, taken place at our dining room table. Whether over daily meals, playing board games, helping with homework, family feasts (and troubles), and most recently planning of an entire wedding in another country on four weeks notice. It seems that my maternal wisdom can be located at that old table.

While I have been studying today's passage from the Book of Jeremiah, I am transported back to my table and reminded of a time when our eldest son would have been ten years old. It was long past bedtime on the night before his first trip to summer camp. Only hours before that he was full of Christmas Eve anticipation and ready to get to sleep as early as possible so that the first day of Camp Narnia would come all the quicker. But now, sleep was replaced with worry and fears about his debut into the world of boyhood independence. As he wove his concerns into a tapestry of doom, he finally concluded that it would be better to wait until the next year when his younger brother would be old enough to attend camp as well. *"It would be fairer that way, Mum."* This child, the one who to this very day denies his tears as simply *"my eyes are leaking,"* has always been able to convert his fears into a plan where he could make things better for others. Maternal thumbs gently wiped away the tears from his freckled cheeks, without words, his father slid a cup of cocoa to him and by the time the cup was empty – he was calm in the knowledge that we knew he would be great at camp and that even though we would not be there with him that – ***we've got you.*** Tucked back into bed and just as he began to slide back to the land of Nod, he shared that it was best that he go this year to be sure that camp was going to be good for his little brother who was snoring on the top bunk – ***he's got his brother.***

So it seems to be for Jeremiah, gathered at the family table with Yahweh. Imagine a young Jeremiah, the Hebrew text offers that he could be a boy, child, youth or even a servant.² What is clear, however, is that he is not aged or fully developed, yet. Could he have been prepared to be in the presence of "the word of Yahweh"³ or to receive a call to prophecy⁴?

"Before I formed you in the womb I knew you intimately. Before you were born I set you apart, and appointed you a prophet to the nations."⁵ There is a gentleness and comforting essence in these words despite the enormity of their meaning. I am reminded of the words of Christian mystic, Julian of Norwich, who wrote "God loved us before he made us; and his love has never diminished and never shall."⁶ There is a connectedness in the call – not a

¹ PhD in Human Relationships. This sermon was presented at Open Door Worship – Keffer Chapel, Martin Luther University College, January 30, 2019.

² Berlin, Adele, and Marc Zvi. Brettler. *The Jewish Study Bible: Jewish Publication Society Tanakh Translation*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014.

³ Jeremiah 1:4 "word of the Lord"

⁴ Jeremiah 1:5

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Julian, G. Warrack, Yolande Clarke, and A. N. Wilson. *Revelations of Divine Love*. London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2017.

directive from above – but rather this passage the sense of a *mothering* god who is able to see more than the physical. Connected at the level of the unseen – here, described in a language of the time “before the flesh.”⁷ Yahweh speaks to Jeremiah of the time when he was a spark of love connected with the divine.

These words of creation in Hebrew – **etz se re ka** or the action of I formed you in this passage is mirrored from Genesis, in potter’s language, where Yahweh forms Adam from the red clay⁸ and the creation of the beasts.⁹ There is a dual language of the womb and birthing - connecting to the human experience but also connecting to Israel. Jeremiah would have understood knowledge of¹⁰ and setting you apart¹¹ before being formed in the flesh as language explicitly for Kings and Prophets alone – but unsurprisingly, he struggles to make the connection to himself.

His pleading, “I do not know how to speak ... I am only a boy”¹² – the shock and lack of preparedness is understandable. How could he know if he is capable of being a servant of God, let alone a prophet?

Last summer, in the waters south of Victoria BC, an Orca mother known as Tahlequah or J35 and a member of the JPod southern resident pod delivered a female calf which died moments after she was born.¹³ Tahlequah is twenty-one years old and this calf is her third, of which only one male calf born in 2010 has survived. The reality of these “urban pods” is that birth rates have been dropping for almost two decades. Three years have passed since the last successful birth to the JPod. The Centre for Whale Research reports that the southern resident orcas now only number to seventy-five, a 25% decline over the last twenty years. Scientists point toward the demise of the salmon fishery in Pacific waters, specifically wild Chinook salmon, which has depleted the food supply for the Orca population. This, and increased marine traffic and resulting pollution of the Salish Sea, have made the environment less habitable for these grand mammals.

Despite the steady decline of the Orca population in the past two decades, there has been remarkably little public outcry about the situation. It was the excruciating display of grief by Tahlequah that caught the attention of the world. For an unprecedented seventeen days, she carried her 250 pound deceased calf with her – it was reported that other Orcas in the Jpod demonstrated signs of concern for Tahlequah after seven days; at the same time scientists reported that she was showing signs of emaciation. At this time, other Orcas in the pod assisted her during her vigil. She surfaced the corpse of her offspring on her rostrum (her beak), on her arched back and by the tail in her mouth. By the ninth day of her vigil, there were visible signs of decay making it difficult to carry. During her vigil, Tahlequah carried her calf for over one thousand miles.

Orcas and other whales have been reported to demonstrate their grief by carrying their deceased with them but for significantly shorter periods of time. It is well documented

⁷ Jerimiah 1:5

⁸ Genesis 2:7-8

⁹ Genesis 2:19

¹⁰ Jerimiah 1:5

¹¹ Jerimiah 1:1

¹² Jerimiah 1:6

¹³“Mourning Orca Mom Won't Let Baby Whale Go.” YouTube. July 27, 2018. Accessed April 03, 2019. <https://youtu.be/hWr8LUy1l0A>. This video clip prefaced the sermon.

that mammals and primates practice rituals, ceremony-like death practices and hold memory of their lost loved ones.

What is known is that the gestation period for an Orca is seventeen months. For almost a year and a half, the expectant mother will carry her growing calf as it forms in her womb and as part of her pod. Her body will evolve and she will know her calf before she delivers – in the intimate way that only a mother can experience. In her way, she will have consecrated her calf as being sacred. Her calf lived for a mere thirty minutes – a short but impactful life. Is it possible that Tahlequah could have known that her calf would not survive?

Why did she grieve so openly and why would her pod support her in her vigil? She carried the body of her calf for seventeen days – a day for every month she carried it inside the safety of her womb – before she was able to let go and allow the calf's body to rest deep in the water. Why is this mother's grief for the loss of her offspring catching the attention of the world? Even in death and the despair of grief, Tahlequah responded to her calf – ***I've got you.***

The thing with being in shock is that it generally follows that there is a state of numbness. I wonder if Jeremiah, upon receiving his call, felt like the carpet had been pulled out from under his feet. In an instant, life changed. Jeremiah would have felt a significant loss – the end of life, a youthful life, and all that he knew. As readers, do we fully recognize both the grief of Jeremiah's loss and the call to prophecy?

Would a *mothering* god protect, nurture and validate Jeremiah in such a moment? It seems so – for just as a mother would wipe away tears, brush the dust off knees and elbows and show their child that they've already got what it takes to make things alright. Just as Yahweh knew Jeremiah before he was in the womb and Yahweh protects, nurtures and validates him, sharing that before he was born into this life- he created to and consecrated for this purpose; that Yahweh's words and knowledge are already within him – that he has always been a servant of God. A *mothering* Yahweh affirms the connection that existed before Jeremiah experienced the flesh or the womb. There was always a relationship between Creator and the spark of divine energy that would manifest in the world as Jeremiah. They sit together at their table and Yahweh wipes away the tears and connects deeply saying ***hey... I've got you.***

But what of the southern resident orcas of Jpod? What mothering god or goddess will reach out and touch the waters so that they are clean, cold, quiet and restored to a time where the schools of Chinook salmon run plenty once again? What mothering god or goddess will reach out and touch the hearts and minds of people, corporations and governments to understand that pipelines and more shipping transport are not the answer? What mothering god or goddess will reach out and through the hands and feet of people to take action to protect the water, air and land? When will the mothering god or goddess reach out and touch our ears so that we can hear the cries of Mother Earth as she shares her excruciating grief for what has already happened to our planet?

My wondering today is when it be recognized that a grieving mother Orca and her deceased calf in a rapidly-declining pod in the Pacific Ocean truly is the voice of Creation - calling out to each of us for our response - ***we've got you.***

Amen.

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