

Like This,
Not Like That

Metaphors in the Bible
Describing God



Moms Group
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Introduction

It is human nature to look for our own recognizable form in anything mysterious in order to relate to it and make sense of it. Ancient civilizations did this too, imagining the gods and goddesses in their origin stories as persons with special powers that set them apart from mere humans. Western thinkers usually think of God as a man: an old, wise, white-haired and white-skinned grandfather. This common image of God is strikingly similar to the Norse idea of the All Father and the Greeks' ruler of the pantheon of gods, the mighty Zeus. He also bears more than a passing resemblance to the American version of Santa Claus. The God of the Judeo-Christian faith, though, is not merely a more powerful, magical human. He is omnipresent Spirit that is impossible to describe and grasp; he is truly beyond our understanding and even imagining.

He wants us to know him, though, so he reveals himself and makes himself accessible to us in different ways. The Franciscans lead the way in teaching that the "first Bible" is creation itself. *"Ever since God created the world, God's everlasting power and divinity—however invisible—are there for the mind to see in the things that God has made" (Romans 1:20)*. God made all that is to show us himself in a way that we can taste, smell and touch, and in that sense he is in everything. Not in a pantheistic way--every thing is not god, but all of the created world was given to us as an expression of God himself in his love and goodness.

Another way God reaches out to us to help us know him is in the scriptures. Before Jesus appeared on the scene, the scriptures relied on metaphors as gateways to knowing the unknowable, comparing God to everything from elements and weather to animals and people. Scriptures reference the "first Bible"--creation--through metaphors to help us understand the Creator. He isn't exactly any of these things, and is certainly not contained in the comparisons and the pictures they paint. But by looking at the things God is like, we begin to build a set of images we can use to start to know him.

The Bible teaches that Jesus is God in human flesh--the incarnation of God--and is the perfect representation of God. *"He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power" (Hebrews 1:3)*. Imagining God-with-us as a younger, bearded Jewish man in a robe and sandals--the way he might have looked in his years walking the earth--is an image of God, but it is not the end of the story. The metaphors are still true, and in his teachings, Jesus himself continued with some of them, enhancing their meanings.

In this study, we will look at some of the ways God is described through metaphors in the Bible and explore how he has met us and wants to continue meeting us in all the joys and struggles of our earthy, messy lives.

Metaphor invites imagination. Our God-given creativity can guide us into new connections with God and allow us to experience relationship with him in ways that pure scholarship cannot access. Let your mind wander through the pictures the metaphors inspire, and let your imagination add to them in the way that speaks uniquely to you.

These are only a few metaphors that stood out to me, and I only list some of the texts. Feel free to add any that come to mind or speak to you.

God is Like...

A Rock

Water

Light

A Woman

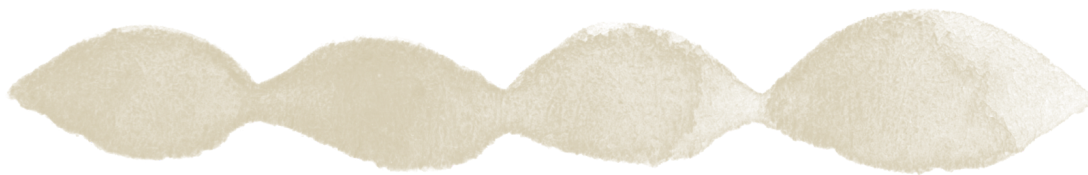
A Worker

Untamed Nature



God is Like...

A Rock



The idea of God as our rock is prevalent; it's in the old and new testaments and in countless songs, poems and stories. It works together with other scripture metaphors, too--God as our fortress, strong tower and shield. The romanticized idea of a high-walled castle with a moat captures my imagination, as well as the thought of a mighty warrior (like Aragorn, maybe?) protecting me with his shield. God is immovable, unbreakable. He is our protector, our safe space, our solid ground.

Questions for Reflection

What characteristics of a rock or a fortress come to mind? What images fire your imagination?

What is the other side of the metaphor--what is not like a rock?

Scripture

All verses are in English Standard Version

Deuteronomy 32:4

*"The Rock, his work is perfect,
for all his ways are justice.
A God of faithfulness and without iniquity,
just and upright is he.*

Psalms 62:5-8

*For God alone, O my soul, wait in silence,
for my hope is from him.
He only is my rock and my salvation,
my fortress; I shall not be shaken.
On God rests my salvation and my glory;
my mighty rock, my refuge is God.
Trust in him at all times, O people;
pour out your heart before him;
God is a refuge for us.*

Psalm 3:3

*But you, O Lord, are a shield about me,
my glory, and the lifter of my head.*

Proverbs 30:5

*Every word of God proves true;
he is a shield to those who take refuge in him.*

Psalm 84:11

*For the Lord God is a sun and shield;
the Lord bestows favor and honor.
No good thing does he withhold
from those who walk uprightly.*

Proverbs 18:10

*The name of the Lord is a strong tower;
the righteous man runs into it and is safe.*

Psalm 61:1-5

*Hear my cry, O God,
listen to my prayer;
from the end of the earth I call to you
when my heart is faint.
Lead me to the rock
that is higher than I,
for you have been my refuge,
a strong tower against the enemy.
Let me dwell in your tent forever!
Let me take refuge under the shelter of your wings! Selah
For you, O God, have heard my vows;
you have given me the heritage of those who fear your name.*

2 Samuel 22:3-4

*"The Lord is my rock and my fortress and my deliverer,
My God, my rock, in whom I take refuge,
my shield, and the horn of my salvation,
my stronghold and my refuge,
my savior; you save me from violence.
I call upon the Lord, who is worthy to be praised,
and I am saved from my enemies.*

Exodus 17:6

Behold, I will stand before you there on the rock at Horeb, and you shall strike the rock, and water shall come out of it, and the people will drink." And Moses did so in the sight of the elders of Israel.

I Corinthians 10:4

For they drank from the spiritual Rock that followed them, and the Rock was Christ.

I Peter 2:4-8

As you come to him, a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious, you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. For it stands in Scripture:

*"Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone,
a cornerstone chosen and precious,
and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame."*

So the honor is for you who believe, but for those who do not believe,

*"The stone that the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone,"*

and

*"A stone of stumbling,
and a rock of offense."*

Luke 6:46-48

"Why do you call me 'Lord, Lord,' and not do what I tell you? Everyone who comes to me and hears my words and does them, I will show you what he is like: he is like a man building a house, who dug deep and laid the foundation on the rock. And when a flood arose, the stream broke against that house and could not shake it, because it had been well built.

Questions for Reflection

Which of the uses the rock and related metaphors in these verses stands out to you?

What benefits and qualities are mentioned as part of God's character and actions?

How do you picture these metaphors? Do any images come to mind?

How is the image used differently and the same in the old and new testaments?

Do these images change or enhance your understanding of God or Jesus?

Making it Part of Your Story

As you reflect on these verses,
ask God to show you how he is your rock.
Expand and play with the metaphor if you like,
in writing or sketches.


How have you experienced God as your rock, fortress or shield in the past?

In what ways do you need him to be your rock, fortress or shield now?



God is Like...

Water



Water is life. As scientists search for planets that may be able to sustain life, they look for evidence of water. An atmosphere with temperatures and conditions suitable to water are the only ones conducive to life as we know it. Our bodies are 60% water, and our blood is 90% water. Humans can live weeks without food, but only days without water. Even our food is water dependant; crops and animals are just as thirsty as we are. There's water all around us: in the air, in the earth, in the seas, lakes and rivers, and locked away in glaciers. Our lives begin in the water of amniotic fluid and depend on it until death. It's no surprise that water is mentioned over 600 times in the scriptures.

Many Biblical references to water are practical. Where communities settled was largely decided by the availability of water. Boundary lines were drawn around wells and bodies of water. Practical health and safety matters are laid out the laws for the Israelites, giving them specific instructions for washing themselves, their possessions and their animals with water to heal and stop the spread all sorts of rashes, discharges and diseases. The book of Leviticus is quite graphic!

Water is also a powerful metaphor. It's value and attributes are universally understood. It is at the beginning of all things, separated and directed by God's hand in creation; it is judgement and cleansing, punishment and blessing. God commands the flow of water in weather, floods and droughts. He brings water from the earth and the sky, using water to bless his people, to win battles, and to curse his enemies. Water--essential and ubiquitous--almost seems too common to open up deep understanding of God. Maybe it's universality, though, is what makes it a perfect metaphor.

Questions for Reflection

What characteristics of water come to mind?

What is the other side of the metaphor--what is not like water?

Note: For this study, I only included passages that refer to God as water or as having a characteristic of water.

Exodus 17:5-7

And the Lord said to Moses, "Pass on before the people, taking with you some of the elders of Israel, and take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. Behold, I will stand before you there on the rock at Horeb, and you shall strike the rock, and water shall come out of it, and the people will drink." And Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel. And he called the name of the place Massah and Meribah, because of the quarreling of the people of Israel, and because they tested the Lord by saying, "Is the Lord among us or not?"

2 Samuel 5:19-20

And David inquired of the Lord, "Shall I go up against the Philistines? Will you give them into my hand?" And the Lord said to David, "Go up, for I will certainly give the Philistines into your hand." And David came to Baal-perazim, and David defeated them there. And he said, "The Lord has broken through my enemies before me like a breaking flood."

Job 14:18-19

*"But the mountain falls and crumbles away,
and the rock is removed from its place;
the waters wear away the stones;
the torrents wash away the soil of the earth;
so you destroy the hope of man.*

Job 37:1-13

*"At this also my heart trembles
and leaps out of its place.
Keep listening to the thunder of his voice
and the rumbling that comes from his mouth.
Under the whole heaven he lets it go,
and his lightning to the corners of the earth.
After it his voice roars;
he thunders with his majestic voice,
and he does not restrain the lightnings when his voice is heard.
God thunders wondrously with his voice;
he does great things that we cannot comprehend.
For to the snow he says, 'Fall on the earth,
likewise to the downpour, his mighty downpour.
He seals up the hand of every man,
that all men whom he made may know it.
Then the beasts go into their lairs,
and remain in their dens.
From its chamber comes the whirlwind,
and cold from the scattering winds.
By the breath of God ice is given,
and the broad waters are frozen fast.
He loads the thick cloud with moisture;
the clouds scatter his lightning.
They turn around and around by his guidance,
to accomplish all that he commands them
on the face of the habitable world.
Whether for correction or for his land
or for love, he causes it to happen.*

Psalm 1:3-4

*He is like a tree
planted by streams of water
that yields its fruit in its season,
and its leaf does not wither.
In all that he does, he prospers.
The wicked are not so,
but are like chaff that the wind drives away.*

Psalm 42:1-2, 7

*As a deer pants for flowing streams,
so pants my soul for you, O God.
My soul thirsts for God,
for the living God.
Deep calls to deep
at the roar of your waterfalls;
all your breakers and your waves
have gone over me.*

Psalm 63:1

*O God, you are my God; earnestly I seek you;
my soul thirsts for you;
my flesh faints for you,
as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.*

Psalm 77:18-20

*The crash of your thunder was in the whirlwind;
your lightnings lighted up the world;
the earth trembled and shook.
Your way was through the sea,
your path through the great waters;
yet your footprints were unseen.
You led your people like a flock
by the hand of Moses and Aaron.*

Isaiah 12:2-3

*"Behold, God is my salvation;
I will trust, and will not be afraid;
for the Lord God is my strength and my song,
and he has become my salvation."
With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation.*

Isaiah 44:3-4

*For I will pour water on the thirsty land,
and streams on the dry ground;
I will pour my Spirit upon your offspring,
and my blessing on your descendants.
They shall spring up among the grass
like willows by flowing streams.*

Jeremiah 2:13

*My people have committed two evils:
they have forsaken me,
the fountain of living waters,
and hewed out cisterns for themselves,
broken cisterns that can hold no water.*

Ezekial 43:1

Then he led me to the gate, the gate facing east. And behold, the glory of the God of Israel was coming from the east. And the sound of his coming was like the sound of many waters, and the earth shone with his glory.

Habakkuk 2:14

*For the earth will be filled
with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord
as the waters cover the sea.*

John 4:10-15

Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water." The woman said to him, "Sir, you have nothing to draw water with, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our father Jacob? He gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did his sons and his livestock." Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life." The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water, so that I will not be thirsty or have to come here to draw water."

Revelation 1:12-16

Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands, and in the midst of the lampstands one like a son of man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash around his chest. The hairs of his head were white, like white wool, like snow. His eyes were like a flame of fire, his feet were like burnished bronze, refined in a furnace, and his voice was like the roar of many waters. In his right hand he held seven stars, from his mouth came a sharp two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining in full strength.

Revelation 22:1-3

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city; also, on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. No longer will there be anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him.

Questions for Reflection

Which of the uses the water and related metaphors in these verses stands out to you?

What benefits and qualities are mentioned as part of God's character and actions?

How do you picture these metaphors? Do any images come to mind?

How is the image used differently and the same in the old and new testaments?

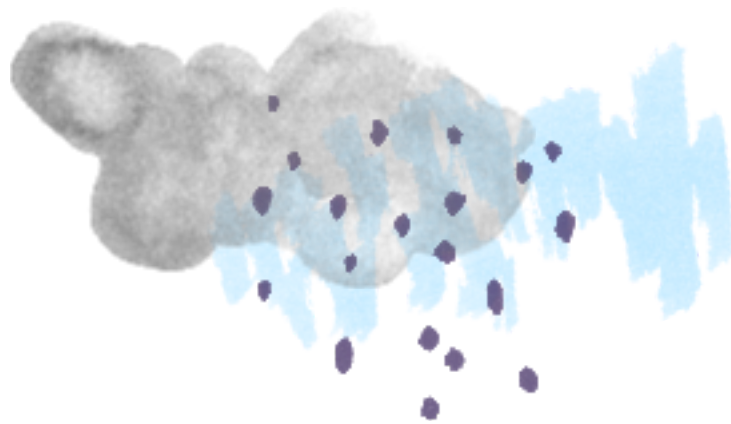
Do these images change or enhance your understanding of God or Jesus?

Making it Part of Your Story

As you reflect on these verses,
ask God to show you how he is your living water.
Expand and play with the metaphor if you like,
in writing or sketches.

How have you experienced God as your living water in the past?

In what ways do you need him to be your living water now?



God is Like...

Light



As a freshman in college, I had an assignment in a Religious Studies class to choose a personal symbol and write about its significance. I had a hard time finding one; the professor discouraged using common symbols, so the cross was out. I finally chose sunshine. On my graded paper, there was a question mark, and then an "Ok." Not exactly a glowing endorsement of my idea. It was an abstract symbol, but also a tangible thing: sunshine is light, warmth and well-being. I'm feeling better about it now, almost 40 years later, as this seems to be a recurring theme for me. Lately, I am trying to spend time in Centering Prayer, and this practice involves choosing a word to still restless thoughts. The word that keeps coming up is "light," and the verse in First John keeps running through my mind: God is light, and in him is no darkness at all.

Light is one of the constants of the universe. Light is all around us, both as visible and invisible spectrums. It is not pure energy; photons, the smallest bits of light, have, speed, position and momentum, among other physical properties. The sun was the earth's original light, and humans have cultivated closer sources throughout history: fire, and more recently, light bulbs that use electricity. In light, things cannot remain hidden or secret unless they hide in a shadow. Light eliminates darkness--whether a tiny patch of it, like a flashlight, or all of it, as in an open field in daylight. Light is reflected in a shine, a gloss, or a glow, and in moonlight, starlight and Aurora Borealis. It is refracted into rainbows, revealing the spectrum of colors that are the visual basis of so much of our experience of beauty. Some plants and animals make their own light, using a chemical reaction to create bioluminescence in a dark cave, deep underwater, in the night sky and even in some fungi and bacteria.

Light defines us in many ways, revealing forms and solid realities in the physical world, and revealing truth, knowledge and the inner workings of the mind in the metaphorical sense. In the creation story, God basically gave boundaries to his own limitless light, and then used its energy to power not only all we see, but all that is. The more we think about it, the bigger this metaphor gets!

Questions for Reflection

What characteristics of light come to mind?

What is the other side of the metaphor--what is not like light?

Scripture

Exodus 13:20-22

And they moved on from Succoth and encamped at Etham, on the edge of the wilderness. And the Lord went before them by day in a pillar of cloud to lead them along the way, and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, that they might travel by day and by night. The pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night did not depart from before the people

2 Samuel 22:28-30

*You save a humble people,
but your eyes are on the haughty to bring them down.
For you are my lamp, O Lord,
and my God lightens my darkness.
For by you I can run against a troop,
and by my God I can leap over a wall*

Job 25:2-3

*"Dominion and fear are with God;
he makes peace in his high heaven.
Is there any number to his armies?
Upon whom does his light not arise?*

Job 41:18

*His sneezings flash forth light,
and his eyes are like the eyelids of the dawn.*

Psalms 27:1

*The Lord is my light and my salvation;
whom shall I fear?
The Lord is the stronghold of my life;
of whom shall I be afraid?*

Psalms 36:8-10

*They feast on the abundance of your house,
and you give them drink from the river of your delights.
For with you is the fountain of life;
in your light do we see light.
Oh, continue your steadfast love to those who know you,
and your righteousness to the upright of heart!*

Psalms 119:105

*Your word is a lamp to my feet
and a light to my path.*

Psalm 139:11-12

*If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me,
and the light about me be night,"
even the darkness is not dark to you;
the night is bright as the day,
for darkness is as light with you.*

Isaiah 60:18-20

*Violence shall no more be heard in your land,
devastation or destruction within your borders;
you shall call your walls Salvation,
and your gates Praise.
The sun shall be no more
your light by day,
nor for brightness shall the moon
give you light;
but the Lord will be your everlasting light,
and your God will be your glory.
Your sun shall no more go down,
nor your moon withdraw itself;
for the Lord will be your everlasting light,
and your days of mourning shall be ended.*

Daniel 2:21-22

*He changes times and seasons;
he removes kings and sets up kings;
he gives wisdom to the wise
and knowledge to those who have understanding;
he reveals deep and hidden things;
he knows what is in the darkness,
and the light dwells with him.*

Micah 7:7-9

*But as for me, I will look to the Lord;
I will wait for the God of my salvation;
my God will hear me.
Rejoice not over me, O my enemy;
when I fall, I shall rise;
when I sit in darkness,
the Lord will be a light to me.
I will bear the indignation of the Lord
because I have sinned against him,
until he pleads my cause
and executes judgment for me.
He will bring me out to the light;
I shall look upon his vindication.*

Matthew 5:14-16

"You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.

John 1:1-9

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him. He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light. The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world.

John 3:16-21

"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed. But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God."

John 8:12

Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."

Acts 22:6-11

"As I was on my way and drew near to Damascus, about noon a great light from heaven suddenly shone around me. And I fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to me, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?' And I answered, 'Who are you, Lord?' And he said to me, 'I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting.' Now those who were with me saw the light but did not understand the voice of the one who was speaking to me. And I said, 'What shall I do, Lord?' And the Lord said to me, 'Rise, and go into Damascus, and there you will be told all that is appointed for you to do.' And since I could not see because of the brightness of that light, I was led by the hand by those who were with me, and came into Damascus.

Philippians 2:14-15

Do all things without grumbling or disputing, that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world

James 1:17

Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.

1 John 1:5-7, 2:7-11

This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.

Beloved, I am writing you no new commandment, but an old commandment that you had from the beginning. The old commandment is the word that you have heard. At the same time, it is a new commandment that I am writing to you, which is true in him and in you, because the darkness is passing away and the true light is already shining. Whoever says he is in the light and hates his brother is still in darkness. Whoever loves his brother abides in the light, and in him there is no cause for stumbling. But whoever hates his brother is in the darkness and walks in the darkness, and does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded his eyes.

Revelation 21:22-26

And I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and its lamp is the Lamb. By its light will the nations walk, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it, and its gates will never be shut by day—and there will be no night there. They will bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations.

Questions for Reflection

In this selection of verses, there are descriptions of God as light, Jesus as light, and of people both receiving and being light themselves. In some cases, the light is both a metaphor and actual light, or life itself.

Which of the uses the light metaphor in these verses stands out to you?

What benefits and qualities are mentioned as part of God's character and actions?

How do you picture these metaphors? Do any images come to mind?

How is the image used differently and the same in the old and new testaments?

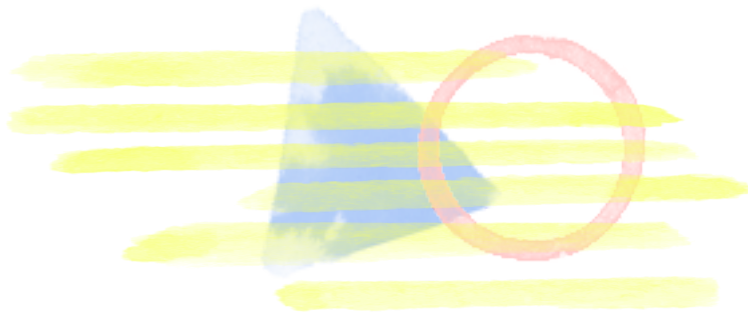
Do these images change or enhance your understanding of God or Jesus?

Making it Part of Your Story

As you reflect on these verses,
ask God to show you how he is your light.
Expand and play with the metaphor if you like,
in writing or sketches.

How have you experienced God as your light in the past?

In what ways do you need him to be your light now?



God is Like...

A Woman



I grew up loving and fearing a male God. He was a caring father, but also a raging warrior. In Jesus, he was a brother and a friend, but he was always masculine and always a mystery. Relationships with men are different than relationships with women; there is a very physical power dynamic and I felt it in my relationship with God. It didn't bother me too much as a child. I trusted that God was a kind, devoted--and unpredictable--man. The God I learned about in Sunday school seemed to have a "feminine side," or at least be emotionally available, because he called himself Love. But as I got older, there was an uncomfortable sense of being somehow less as a woman: created last, "the weaker sex," the submissive one. I didn't doubt that I was loved, but I wasn't entirely sure of my place.

As a young mother, I came across the passages in the old testament describing God as a mother, giving birth and nursing a baby. I was thrilled. God knows the love and the pain of a mother. It seemed scandalous, and yet there it was, in black and white in the Bible. There hadn't been any sermons on these verses in my church. Here was God relating to me--and me to God--in a way I never imagined. No man truly understands the simultaneous weakness and power of labor and birth, that humbling and mighty act, the way a mother does--but somehow God does. No man feels the urgent physical reminder of a child's need the way a nursing mother with hard, lumpy, leaking breasts does, and a man can't know the way a mother does that she needs her hungry baby to relieve her discomfort as much as baby needs her--but somehow God does. This is not heady, dry theology; this is warm, sticky, embodied theology, a communion of birthing and breast milk.

God understands and values me as a woman, and as a woman, I understand God in a unique way. This was a turning point for me. Maybe men have enjoyed this sense of camaraderie with God for a long time, or perhaps they take it for granted because it's so common. The idea of God being a woman still feels edgy and provocative. For women, it's a welcome relief, giving us a safe space with God. For men, it may be threatening to feel the power dynamic in reverse. The shake-up is good for all of us, bringing us into fuller understanding. God is the source and sustainer of life, both intertwined in all our humanness and yet a deep mystery.

Questions for Reflection

What characteristics of a woman or mother come to mind?

What is the other side of the metaphor--what is not like a woman or a mother?

Scripture

Genesis 1:27

*So God created man in his own image,
in the image of God he created him;
male and female he created them.*

Genesis 2:7

Then the Lord God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature.

The Hebrew word translated breath, wind, inspiration or spirit, ruah--literally "presence gives life"--is feminine (Mike Morrell, mikemorrell.org, Biblical Proofs for the the Feminine Face of God in Scripture). Knowing that makes this image feel like a birth; a gathering together in God's "womb" more than the making of a man-shaped mud pie.

Genesis 28:3

El Shaddai bless you and make you fruitful and multiply you, that you may become a company of peoples.

"El Shaddai," one of the Hebrew names of God, is most often translated into English as "God Almighty." But its linguistic roots suggest that it meant "breasted God"—God as "mother," not "father." (Marcus Borg, cited on Center for Action and Contemplation, 11/6/17)

Deuteronomy 32:9-15, 18

*But the Lord's portion is his people,
Jacob his allotted heritage.
He found him in a desert land,
and in the howling waste of the wilderness;
he encircled him, he cared for him,
he kept him as the apple of his eye.
Like an eagle that stirs up its nest,
that flutters over its young,
spreading out its wings, catching them,
bearing them on its pinions,*

*the Lord alone guided him,
no foreign god was with him.
He made him ride on the high places of the land,
and he ate the produce of the field,
and he suckled him with honey out of the rock,
and oil out of the flinty rock.
Curds from the herd, and milk from the flock,
with fat of lambs,
rams of Bashan and goats,
with the very finest of the wheat—
and you drank foaming wine made from the blood of the grape.
But Jeshurun grew fat, and kicked;
you grew fat, stout, and sleek;
then he forsook God who made him
and scoffed at the Rock of his salvation.
You were unmindful of the Rock that bore you,
and you forgot the God who gave you birth.*

Isaiah 42:14-15

*For a long time I have held my peace;
I have kept still and restrained myself;
now I will cry out like a woman in labor;
I will gasp and pant.
I will lay waste mountains and hills,
and dry up all their vegetation;
I will turn the rivers into islands,
and dry up the pools.*

Jeremiah 31:20

*Is Ephraim my dear son?
Is he my darling child?
For as often as I speak against him,
I do remember him still.
Therefore my heart yearns for him;
I will surely have mercy on him,
declares the Lord.*

“Old Testament scholar Phyllis Trible convincingly argues that Jeremiah 31:20, in which God remembers Israel, should be translated, ‘My womb trembles for him; I will truly show motherly-compassion on him.’” (Cited by Fr Rohr, CAC 11/6/17)

Jeremiah 31:22

*How long will you waver,
O faithless daughter?
For the Lord has created a new thing on the earth:
a woman encircles a man."*

"The prophet Jeremiah reminds us: 'For YHWH is creating a new thing upon the earth: a woman [God] will seek and protect a man [collective humanity].'" (Richard Rohr, CAC 11/6/17)

Isaiah 49:15

*Can a woman forget her nursing child,
that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb?
Even these may forget,
yet I will not forget you.*

Is 66:12-13

*For thus says the Lord:
"Behold, I will extend peace to her like a river,
and the glory of the nations like an overflowing stream;
and you shall nurse, you shall be carried upon her hip,
and bounced upon her knees.
As one whom his mother comforts,
so I will comfort you;
you shall be comforted in Jerusalem.*

Hosea 11:1-4, 8

*When Israel was a child, I loved him,
and out of Egypt I called my son.
The more they were called,
the more they went away;
they kept sacrificing to the Baals
and burning offerings to idols.
Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk;
I took them up by their arms,
but they did not know that I healed them.
I led them with cords of kindness,
with the bands of love,
and I became to them as one who eases the yoke on their jaws,
and I bent down to them and fed them.
How can I give you up, O Ephraim?
How can I hand you over, O Israel?
How can I make you like Admah?
How can I treat you like Zeboim?
My heart recoils within me;
my compassion grows warm and tender.*

The Hebrew word for compassion – root word, *rahan*, means womb. *Compassionate*—a word whose semantic associations in Hebrew mean "womb-like." (Mike Morrell on mikemorrell.org and Marcus Borg CAC 11/8/17)

Psalm 104:27-30

*These all look to you,
to give them their food in due season.
When you give it to them, they gather it up;
when you open your hand, they are filled with good things.
When you hide your face, they are dismayed;
when you take away their breath, they die
and return to their dust.
When you send forth your Spirit, they are created,
and you renew the face of the ground.*

The feminine Hebrew word Ruah is translated here as Spirit. (Mike Morrell, mikemorrell.org). This sounds so motherly to me--children being fed, looking to their mother for everything. It makes me think of playing hide and seek, which we do feel like sometimes with God!

Psalm 131:1-3

*O Lord, my heart is not lifted up;
my eyes are not raised too high;
I do not occupy myself with things
too great and too marvelous for me.
But I have calmed and quieted my soul,
like a weaned child with its mother;
like a weaned child is my soul within me.
O Israel, hope in the Lord
from this time forth and forevermore.*

Matthew 23:37-39

"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!"

John 3:8

The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.

There are two uses of the feminine Ruah in the same verse--wind and spirit. (Mike Morrell, mikemorrell.org)

1 John 4:7

Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God.

1 Peter 2:2-3

Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up into salvation—if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good.

Questions for Reflection

Which of the uses the woman metaphor in these verses stands out to you?

What benefits and qualities are mentioned as part of God's character and actions?

How do you picture these metaphors? Do any images come to mind?

How is the image used differently and the same in the old and new testaments?

Do these images change or enhance your understanding of God or Jesus?

God Our Mother

Allison Woodard

To be a Mother is to suffer;
To travail in the dark,
stretched and torn,
exposed in half-naked humiliation,
subjected to indignities
for the sake of new life.

To be a Mother is to say,
"This is my body, broken for you,"
And, in the next instant, in response to the created's primal hunger,
"This is my body, take and eat."

To be a Mother is to self-empty,
To neither slumber nor sleep,
so attuned You are to cries in the night—
Offering the comfort of Yourself,
and assurances of "I'm here."

To be a Mother is to weep
over the fighting and exclusions and wounds
your children inflict on one another;
To long for reconciliation and brotherly love
and—when all is said and done—
To gather all parties, the offender and the offended,
into the folds of your embrace
and to whisper in their ears
that they are Beloved.

To be a mother is to be vulnerable—
To be misunderstood,
Railed against,
Blamed
For the heartaches of the bewildered children
who don't know where else to cast
the angst they feel
over their own existence
in this perplexing universe

To be a mother is to hoist onto your hips those on whom your image is imprinted,
bearing the burden of their weight,
rejoicing in their returned affection,
delighting in their wonder,
bleeding in the presence of their pain.

To be a mother is to be accused of sentimentality one moment,
And injustice the next.
To be the Receiver of endless demands,
Absorber of perpetual complaints,
Reckoner of bottomless needs.

To be a mother is to be an artist;
A keeper of memories past,
Weaver of stories untold,
Visionary of lives looming ahead.

To be a mother is to be the first voice listened to,
And the first disregarded;
To be a Mender of broken creations,
And Comforter of the distraught children
whose hands wrought them.

To be a mother is to be a Touchstone
and the Source,
Bestower of names,
Influencer of identities;
Life giver,
Life shaper,
Empath,
Healer,
and
Original Love.

This poem is from a great podcast from The Liturgists, "God our Mother." Worth a listen!
(theliturgists.com/podcast/2017/10/17/god-our-mother-live-from-boston)

Making it Part of Your Story

As you reflect on these verses,
ask the Holy Spirit to show you how God is a woman.
Expand and play with the metaphor if you like,
in writing or sketches.

How have you experienced God as a mother or compassionate friend in the past?

In what ways do you need him to be a mother or compassionate friend now?



God is Like...

A worker



I made my kids my career. Often, I felt that I should be doing something bigger and more worthy of the title "career," something--if I'm honest--that earned a paycheck. Getting money in return for a product validates labor in our society. I gave myself all the pep talks, read the books and listened to the voices that assured me that my course was a good one. What has given me a sense of peace and acceptance about my labor, though, has not been the comparisons and the competition to prove who is doing the best work. Seeing God in both grand and humble roles, giving importance to them all, illustrates for me the unique contribution all work is to the whole of humanity. God gives dignity to everyday, mundane work as well as creative expressions by coming close and working among us.

A far-off, unfathomable god would be too abstract to understand, too big to trust, and too far outside of our experience to love. When a brilliant sunset sweeps the sky with pink and orange clouds that contract into a lingering fiery-red glow on the horizon, God comes to us as an artist. We feel God is close to us when compared to everyday sorts of workers that we know: a tailor, a knitter, a gardener, a launderer, a potter, a shepherd, a cook--and even a cheesemaker! God is the Almighty--holy and beyond us--and yet is the humble craftsman and servant among us. If we see our world as God's artistry, our bodies as God's creativity, our sustenance as God's provision, and our lives as God's lovingly-woven tapestry, God is personal and close. If we see God as the patient craftsman working in all aspects of our world and our lives, we are close to God because we are workers and artists too.

Many of the metaphors I chose here appear first in the Old Testament, but find a fuller, fleshed-out expression in the New Testament in the person of Jesus--the ultimate servant. The poets of old hinted at another side to the fearsome God in their descriptions, but when Jesus came as God's fullest revelation, it was clear that those hints actually revealed the tenderness and care of God's very heart.

Questions for Reflection

What characteristics of a worker or craftsman come to mind? Do you relate to any of the types of workers mentioned?

What is the other side of the metaphor--what is not like a worker?

Scripture

Tailor and Knitter

Genesis 3:21

And the Lord God made for Adam and for his wife garments of skins and clothed them.

Job 10:11-12

You clothed me with skin and flesh,
and knit me together with bones and sinews.
You have granted me life and steadfast love,
and your care has preserved my spirit.

Ps 139:5, 13-15

You hem me in, behind and before,
and lay your hand upon me.
For you formed my inward parts;
you knitted me together in my mother's womb.
I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.
Wonderful are your works;
my soul knows it very well.
My frame was not hidden from you,
when I was being made in secret,
intricately woven in the depths of the earth.

Gardener

Genesis 2:8-9

And the Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the east, and there he put the man whom he had formed. And out of the ground the Lord God made to spring up every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food. The tree of life was in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

Numbers 24:5-6

How lovely are your tents, O Jacob,
your encampments, O Israel!
Like palm groves that stretch afar,
like gardens beside a river,
like aloes that the Lord has planted,
like cedar trees beside the waters.

John 15:1-5

"I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit. Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.

John 20:15-16

Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?" Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." Jesus said to her, "Mary." She turned and said to him in Aramaic, "Rabboni!" (which means Teacher).

Laundrerer

Isaiah 4:2-6

In that day the branch of the Lord shall be beautiful and glorious, and the fruit of the land shall be the pride and honor of the survivors of Israel. And he who is left in Zion and remains in Jerusalem will be called holy, everyone who has been recorded for life in Jerusalem, when the Lord shall have washed away the filth of the daughters of Zion and cleansed the bloodstains of Jerusalem from its midst by a spirit of judgment and by a spirit of burning. Then the Lord will create over the whole site of Mount Zion and over her assemblies a cloud by day, and smoke and the shining of a flaming fire by night; for over all the glory there will be a canopy. There will be a booth for shade by day from the heat, and for a refuge and a shelter from the storm and rain.

Psalms 51:1-7

Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your steadfast love;
according to your abundant mercy
blot out my transgressions.
Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,
and cleanse me from my sin!
For I know my transgressions,
and my sin is ever before me.
Against you, you only, have I sinned
and done what is evil in your sight,
so that you may be justified in your words
and blameless in your judgment.
Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity,
and in sin did my mother conceive me.
Behold, you delight in truth in the inward being,
and you teach me wisdom in the secret heart.
Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;
wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.

1 John 1:9

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

Potter

Isaiah 64:6

But now, O Lord, you are our Father;
we are the clay, and you are our potter;
we are all the work of your hand.

Jeremiah 18:6

O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter has done? declares the Lord. Behold, like the clay in the potter's hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel.

Romans 9:20

But who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, "Why have you made me like this?"

Ephesians 2:8-10

For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

Shepherd

Psalms 23:1-4

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.
He makes me lie down in green pastures.
He leads me beside still waters.
He restores my soul.
He leads me in paths of righteousness
for his name's sake.
Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil,
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff,
they comfort me.

Psalm 28:8-9

The Lord is the strength of his people;
He is the saving refuge of his anointed.
Oh, save your people and bless your heritage!
Be their shepherd and carry them forever.

Isaiah 40:11

He will tend his flock like a shepherd;
he will gather the lambs in his arms;
he will carry them in his bosom,
and gently lead those that are with young.

John 10:11-16

I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. He who is a hired hand and not a shepherd, who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees, and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. He flees because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep. I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep. And I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.

Cook and Caterer

Exodus 16:31

Now the house of Israel called its name manna. It was like coriander seed, white, and the taste of it was like wafers made with honey.

Psalm 78:23-29

Yet he commanded the skies above
and opened the doors of heaven,
and he rained down on them manna to eat
and gave them the grain of heaven.
Man ate of the bread of the angels;
he sent them food in abundance.
He caused the east wind to blow in the heavens,
and by his power he led out the south wind;
he rained meat on them like dust,
winged birds like the sand of the seas;

he let them fall in the midst of their camp,
all around their dwellings.
And they ate and were well filled,
for he gave them what they craved.

Job 10:10

Did you not pour me out like milk
and curdle me like cheese?

Matthew 26:26-29

Now as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and after blessing it broke it and gave it to the disciples, and said, "Take, eat; this is my body." And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, "Drink of it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you I will not drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom."

John 21:9-13

When they got out on land, they saw a charcoal fire in place, with fish laid out on it, and bread. Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish that you have just caught." So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, 153 of them. And although there were so many, the net was not torn. Jesus said to them, "Come and have breakfast." Now none of the disciples dared ask him, "Who are you?" They knew it was the Lord. Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and so with the fish.

Questions for Reflection

Which of the worker metaphors in these verses stand out to you?

What benefits and qualities are part of God's character and actions?

How do you picture these metaphors? Do any images come to mind?

How is the image used differently and the same in the old and new testaments?

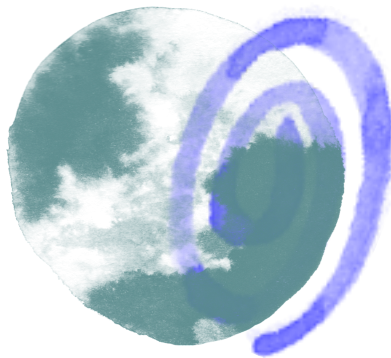
Do these images change or enhance your understanding of God or Jesus?

Making it Part of Your Story

As you reflect on these verses,
ask God to show you how he is close to you.
Expand and play with the metaphor if you like,
in writing or sketches.

How have you experienced God as your potter, shepherd, or other worker in the past?

In what ways do you need him to be your potter, shepherd or worker now?



God is Like...

Untamed Nature



Looking at this metaphor now, in March of 2020, the pandemic of COVID-19 is the untamed nature on my mind. I push the thought back; this frightening, deadly virus surely doesn't work as a metaphor for God. Searching scripture, I find what I was originally thinking: metaphors of storms and waves, bears, lions, and leopards. Most of these describe God's judgement and anger, though. My mind tiptoes around the idea that somehow this virus, attacking the world in an unprecedented way, comes as judgement or punishment. Again, I push it back; all of these metaphors of God's unsparing judgement are in the Old Testament, and we are living in the New Testament age. Jesus comes not to judge, but to forgive.

Even in the Old Testament though, metaphors comparing God or his actions to untamed nature are not the full expression of God. They offer us a feeling more than facts about God's actions. Nature, with its wild, wily beasts and whipping, pummeling storms, is powerful, unpredictable and uncontrollable. When we look around us at nature, we gain perspective about ourselves in the context of a great and beautiful mystery. God, like nature, moves outside, above and all around us. We cannot contain or tame God. Even Jesus--the greatest example of love, healing and grace--is unpredictable and mysterious.

Another scripture comes to mind as I ponder these ideas. In the book of 1 Kings, when Elijah fears for his life, he flees into the wilderness and God provides for him on his journey. He finds a cave, and like us, shelters-in-place. Then God--storming, quaking and fiery--meets him and speaks to him in a surprisingly personal, intimate way.

There are two sections in this study. The first section has verses using metaphors of nature to describe God's actions. The second section also uses nature metaphors, but it is a story of an encounter between the prophet Elijah and God. The two parts give our sense of God a fuller, larger feel. God is there, yet ungraspable, like a leopard slinking through the jungle, a storm cloud blowing through the mountains, and a whisper we strain to hear.

Part One

Exodus 15:9-11

*The enemy said, 'I will pursue, I will overtake,
I will divide the spoil, my desire shall have its fill of them.
I will draw my sword; my hand shall destroy them.'
You blew with your wind; the sea covered them;
they sank like lead in the mighty waters.
"Who is like you, O Lord, among the gods?
Who is like you, majestic in holiness,
awesome in glorious deeds, doing wonders?*

Psalms 42: 7

*Deep calls to deep
at the roar of your waterfalls;
all your breakers and your waves
have gone over me.*

Isaiah 28:2

*Behold, the Lord has one who is mighty and strong;
like a storm of hail, a destroying tempest,
like a storm of mighty, overflowing waters,
he casts down to the earth with his hand.*

Isaiah 30:30

*And the Lord will cause his majestic voice to be heard and the descending blow of his arm to be seen,
in furious anger and a flame of devouring fire, with a cloudburst and storm and hailstones.*

Jeremiah 23:19

*Behold, the storm of the Lord!
Wrath has gone forth,
a whirling tempest;
it will burst upon the head of the wicked.*

Ezekiel 13:13-14

Therefore thus says the Lord God: I will make a stormy wind break out in my wrath, and there shall be a deluge of rain in my anger, and great hailstones in wrath to make a full end.

Nahum 1:3

*The Lord is slow to anger and great in power,
and the Lord will by no means clear the guilty.
His way is in whirlwind and storm,
and the clouds are the dust of his feet.*

Lamentations 3:10-11

*He is a bear lying in wait for me,
a lion in hiding;
he turned aside my steps and tore me to pieces;
he has made me desolate.*

Hosea 5:14-15

*For I will be like a lion to Ephraim,
and like a young lion to the house of Judah.
I, even I, will tear and go away;
I will carry off, and no one shall rescue.
I will return again to my place,
until they acknowledge their guilt and seek my face,
and in their distress earnestly seek me.*

Hosea 13:6-8

*When I fed them, they were satisfied;
when they were satisfied, they became proud;
then they forgot me.
So I will be like a lion to them,
like a leopard I will lurk by the path.
Like a bear robbed of her cubs,
I will attack them and rip them open;
like a lion I will devour them—
a wild animal will tear them apart.*

Jeremiah 4:7-8, 13

*A lion has gone up from his thicket,
a destroyer of nations has set out;
he has gone out from his place
to make your land a waste;
your cities will be ruins
without inhabitant.
For this put on sackcloth,
lament and wail,
for the fierce anger of the Lord
has not turned back from us."*

*Behold, he comes up like clouds;
his chariots like the whirlwind;
his horses are swifter than eagles—
woe to us, for we are ruined!*

Questions for Reflection

Which of these metaphors comparing God to a wild beast or a raging storm stand out to you?

How do they expand or change your understanding of God?

Part Two

1 Kings 19:1-18

Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. Then Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah, saying, "So may the gods do to me and more also, if I do not make your life as the life of one of them by this time tomorrow." Then he was afraid, and he arose and ran for his life and came to Beersheba, which belongs to Judah, and left his servant there.

But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness and came and sat down under a broom tree. And he asked that he might die, saying, "It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my fathers." And he lay down and slept under a broom tree. And behold, an angel touched him and said to him, "Arise and eat." And he looked, and behold, there was at his head a cake baked on hot stones and a jar of water. And he ate and drank and lay down again. And the angel of the Lord came again a second time and touched him and said, "Arise and eat, for the journey is too great for you." And he arose and ate and drank, and went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb, the mount of God.

There he came to a cave and lodged in it. And behold, the word of the Lord came to him, and he said to him, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" He said, "I have been very jealous for the Lord, the God of hosts. For the people of Israel have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword, and I, even I only, am left, and they seek my life, to take it away."

And he said, "Go out and stand on the mount before the Lord." And behold, the Lord passed by, and a great and strong wind tore the mountains and broke in pieces the rocks before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind. And after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake. And after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire the sound of a low whisper (also could be translated "a sound, a thin silence") And when Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his cloak and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. And behold, there came a voice to him and said, "What are you doing here, Elijah?"

He said, "I have been very jealous for the Lord, the God of hosts. For the people of Israel have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword, and I, even I only, am left, and they seek my life, to take it away."

And the Lord said to him, "Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus. And when you arrive, you shall anoint Hazael to be king over Syria. And Jehu the son of Nimshi you shall anoint to be king over Israel, and Elisha the son of Shaphat of Abel-meholah you shall anoint to be prophet in your place. And the one who escapes from the sword of Hazael shall Jehu put to death, and the one who escapes from the sword of Jehu shall Elisha put to death. Yet I will leave seven thousand in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him."

Questions for Reflection

How is Elijah's situation like ours right now?

What stands out to you about how God met Elijah in his fear and loneliness?

Making it Part of Your Story

As you reflect on these verses,
ask God to show you how he is like wild, untamed nature.
Expand and play with the metaphor if you like,
in writing or sketches.

How have you experienced God as untamed or uncontrollable in the past?

In what ways does he speak to you in a low whisper, or a thin silence?

