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Text of a message delivered by Holly Walton
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HELD IN LOVE

MOTHER'S DAY 2026

INTRODUCTION

As today is a special service, I thought I would tell you a little of my story ...the story of my faith, my mum and the fearsome woman from whom I am descended, and how birds have flown in and out of every chapter of my life.

One of the blessings of the strange time we call “the empty nest” is that my husband Mike and I have the whole house to ourselves, and for the first time in over thirty years I have a room to call my own. We named this special little space *the growlery*, which is an old English word coined by Charles Dickens meaning “a place to retreat to, alone, when ill-humoured”. It’s where I spend time in contemplative prayer, journalling and reading my Bible. It's where I have offered spiritual direction, planned retreats and written sermons. It's my sanctuary, filled with precious books and symbols of God's presence in my life. And yes. I am often ill-humoured in my growlery!

As I look around a lifetime of memories press in...

That tiny picture is of my mum taken in about 1932. Those fearsome looking gals are the reason that I'm a Kiwi. They are great-grandmother Mary Frances, my great-great grandmother Jane and my great-great-great-grandmother Hepzibah. The little boys are my grandfather and his brother and they are all posing outside Hepzibah's home in Swannanoa near Christchurch. This picture was taken just before Mary and her young family set sail for South Africa.

If you gaze around you will also notice, I realise, a rather excessive number of birds! Mugs, puzzles, cushions, pictures...



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LEARNING TO PAY ATTENTION: BIRDS, CHILDHOOD, AND GOD'S NEARNESS

I was first introduced to birds by my mum. Our one-acre property with its many towering trees was a beginner bird watcher's paradise. My mum taught me how to really look at birds, noticing their tails and beaks and plumage. She presented them to me on a first name basis: Jackie-hangman and Piet-my-vrou were old friends, whilst others like rice-eyes and kakkelaars (cacklers), we named together. It was only when she took me to Pretoria to visit a museum containing the complete collection of South African stuffed birds, that I discovered birds actually had proper names, and all those little brown birds that we were classifying as one, were probably the females of countless different families of birds!

Sometimes Mum and I would wake up really early to sit outside in the predawn darkness and listen to the symphony of bird calls. The birds and the two of us wrapped in blankets knitted by my Gran and clasping mugs of hot tea made everything feel right in the world.

Once, after a particularly massive Highveld thunderstorm, I remember quietly creeping around the garden shed and past the bird bath to be rewarded with a fleeting glimpse of an excruciatingly shy rain bird. I remember the thrill of accurately identifying a flock of Rameron pigeons that had suddenly made our mulberry tree their home, and which left just as suddenly on discovering that our resident cat had a particular taste for Rameron. I have memories of screaming and screaming on discovering a lizard carcass in the plum tree hung out to cure by our butcher bird and of chasing away the wood hoopoes because I thought their horrible, cackling laughter was simply aimed at mocking me.

On family holidays I discovered pelicans flying low over reeded lakes, spoonbills wading in the shallows and a Kori Bustard camouflaged in the thorn trees of the Kruger Park. The haunting cry of the African Fish Eagle mixed in with sounds of distant drumming and the distinctive smell of potato trees near the Mozambique border is one of those core memories I will never forget.



Weekends spent on my granny's farm meant countless new birds to be discovered. Brilliant little turquoise birds lived around the swimming pool whilst terrifying birds of prey circled in the heavens and stole our kittens.

As a child, footloose and fancy free, the world seemed like a playground filled with treasures, a real-life Eden where God was close and to be trusted. God was a part of my life in the same way that birds were – present, surprising, playful and just waiting to be discovered. I didn't know it then, but in learning to watch birds I was also learning how to pay attention - to God, to creation and to a world alive with possibility.

WHEN THE BIRDS FELL SILENT: LOSS, LAMENT, AND THE ABSENCE OF GOD

As is inevitable, I grew up and left home. Pretty soon I was drinking cups of steaming coffee in a bird hide with my new husband. With Bishop Birds and Red-knobbed Coots we made life plans in hushed whispers, the binoculars untouched and the bird book unopened.

Some long and difficult years followed. The bird book started to gather dust, and so did my Bible. My journals from that time are filled with heavy lament and unanswered prayer. The playful, present God of my childhood seemed to retreat, taking the birds with him.

Years passed by and finally my prayers were answered in ways that only God could have orchestrated. Suddenly I found myself feeding ducks with my three little girls, splashing through rock pools whilst pointing out oyster catchers and terns and Hartlaub's gulls.

In my late 30s, when my Mum became frail, I sat besides her wheelchair beneath heart shaped leaves, surrounded by the comforting familiarity of sparrows and weaver birds. We spoke of the children, and my life far away and the silent pauses were filled with the cheerful ha-de-da calls of ibises fossicking for worms in the lawn nearby.

When she became really, really frail I would walk the beach with my heart full of wordless pleas and prayers... on one occasion, the tear blurred outlines of gulls

flapping and soaring with me as I walked...and the beach sand covered in thousands of tiny, white feathers were a real comfort.

After my mamma died I lost the birds again. I knew they, and God, were still there, but they moved invisibly in and out of my life.

THE SLOW RETURN: GRIEF, RECOGNITION, AND GOD'S GENTLE PRESENCE

And then, one grey and rainy morning, a perfect Cape Eagle Owl came soaring into my garden and landed with all of his clumsy majesty on my balcony. With a soulful and slow hoot he turned unhurriedly to stare at me with his unblinking, yellow eyes. I was mesmerised.

And just like that the birds were back.



Not long after that, I “happened” to see a notice about an upcoming contemplative prayer retreat...On that retreat, in the silence and with a handful of wiser, older pilgrims, my Bible and journal I began my slow journey back to God.

Shortly after this our family emigrated. Mothering three teenage girls in a new country was hard. And the birds in our new home were different...it felt like learning a whole new language.

I felt lost. Lonely. The older ladies at St Peter's where I was working took me under their wing, loved me and cared for me, tended me...I guess, in a small way they were

filling that mamma void. As I took minutes at an elders meeting one night, they pointed out the sounds of the moreporks calling across Lake Pupuke.

And then, one morning walking to catch the bus, I was stopped dead in my tracks...a beautiful, perfect tiny morepork was sitting quietly near the path. A morepork! It wasn't just that I recognised the bird, it was that I felt recognised myself. In that moment it like God was saying to me...I understand you, I see you. You're welcome!



Another time I was walking along the river at Waikanae whilst on my training as a spiritual director. I was talking to God about the struggles of life and mothering and working and the confusion I felt around calling and ministry, when I noticed 3 Canadian geese flying along the water almost alongside me as I walked. It was like God was saying "you're not alone, all of creation is around you and I am right beside you...we're on this journey together."



IMAGES OF GOD: HOW WE LEARN TO SEE GOD DIFFERENTLY OVER TIME

Isn't it amazing how God speaks to all of us in exactly the way that we are wired to hear. In the Bible God captures the attention of His people through fire, food, silence and stories...Moses' burning bush, quail in the wilderness, stories about lilies and sparrows, a real-life rooster crowing Peter's wakeup call - are all examples that came to mind... For me, birds are one of the major ways in which God captures my attention...

I wonder...what are the ways that God captures your attention? Maybe it is music, or artwork or trees. If something doesn't come to mind straight away, I encourage you to pray about it, ask for eyes open to noticing what God might be trying to show you.

But this morning, there is something else that I would like to share with you from the birds. One of the great gifts of spiritual direction has been having the space to ask a surprisingly simple question: *what does God actually look like to me?*

Author and Carey lecturer Tim Bulkeley describes how the fullness of who God is, what God is like, cannot be captured without resorting to word images or pictures. Scripture gives us many images of God that we are familiar with...Father, Shepherd, judge, ruler, king, potter, lamb, rock, fortress... But, as Bulkeley reminds us, each image is partial:

“Calling God “king” tells of...authority...but is weak at expressing divine love...calling God ‘father’ is potentially a powerful picture of strong protective love, but it too has risks, unless we also speak of God as mother...”

We tend to have a dominant image of God, and as we go through life and faith, this image of God can change or additional images can be added. Sometimes we ‘inherit’ an image of God from our childhood – God as a puppet-master or God as disciplinarian, for example.

GOD AS MOTHER HEN: A TENDER AND FIERCE LOVE

The era that I grew up in, and the conservative church that I attended, meant that as a young adult my image of God as a creative, playful companion was replaced by a rather strict, all-powerful ruler who was particularly masculine. And yes, that is a portion of what God is like. But God wanted me to experience something more, and the image that I discovered, which felt almost sacrilegious at the time...was of the mother-ness of God found in both Matthew 23: 37 and Luke 13:34:

“O Jerusalem, Jerusalem... How often I wanted to gather your children together [around Me], as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings....”

Just sit with that image for a moment...God is described as a mother hen gathering her chicks under her wing. This immediately brought to mind the feeling of being gathered under my Granny's arm when we travelling to her farm. How she would pull me close, and how safe and comfortable I felt with my head resting on her shoulder with her arm protectively around me. My understanding of the nature of God was suddenly expanded to include this wonderful image of a loving, tender, gentle, comforting, motherly God.

There are other Bible passages that speak to this image of the mother hen's protective wing. During lockdown, I rediscovered Psalm 91:

*²I will say of the Lord, "He is my refuge and my fortress,
my God, in whom I trust."*

*³Surely he will save you from the fowler's snare
and from the deadly pestilence.*

***⁴He will cover you with his feathers,
and under his wings you will find refuge;
his faithfulness will be your shield and rampart.***

*⁵You will not fear the terror of night,
nor the arrow that flies by day,*

*⁶nor the pestilence that stalks in the darkness,
nor the plague that destroys at midday.*



I have always found the warlike, more masculine language of the armour of God described in Ephesians 6 difficult to embrace – even though I know many people find it encouraging and helpful – but in Psalm 91 I realised that the wing feathers are the shield protecting us from the arrows and the enemy – God was speaking the same message but in images and language that I could hear..

I once tried to pick up a fluffy, yellow chick from the brood on my Granny's farm...there was nothing soft and gentle about the way that mother hen went for me, squawking and flapping her wings and pecking at me until I very quickly dropped the little chick and ran for all I was worth. And God is like that about me...tucking me close, safely ,

protectively, gently BUT also prepared to fight for me, stand in the way of danger to protect my soul and easily able to fend off the night terrors and the deadly pestilence.

FINDING REFUGE UNDER GOD'S WINGS IN THE PRESENT MOMENT

And that brings me to now. This year has been stretching for our Care team. Our church family has been hurting; our team has been hurting. Over and over the image of finding refuge in the shadow of God's wing has come up – in supervision, in my quiet times, offered by someone as a word from God. God seemed to be saying, under my wings you will find refuge...under my wings all those you are caring for, praying for will find refuge and safety. Trust me to protect them and love them and nourish them as a mother hen gathers, protects and nourishes her chicks...trust me...

In the midst of the most difficult time, just after Sarah passed away, I was in Dunedin for my daughter Rebekah's graduation. We had been at Larnach Castle in the morning and Rebekah, David and Mike said that, if I was keen, they would take me to the Royal Albatross Centre. When you pay, the staff are very clear that they don't guarantee any sightings of the albatross in flight. Very clear...We had been in the lookout for what seemed like an age and apart from the two rather distant nests with fluffy, plump white albatross chicks we didn't see anything other than seagulls.



And then next thing there was a collective gasp as an albatross flew passed the window...and then another and again and on and on for about 20 minutes. I managed to take this photo with my phone...



They were so close that we could see the details of their beaks, their feet, even their eyes. But what really caught my attention was the size of their wings – look at that wingspan. Up to 3 metres from tip to tip. All the images of the protective mother hen and the safety of her wing came flooding back. And God whispered quietly to me, “look at those mighty albatross wings...now just imagine the size of **my** protective wings!”

This image feels especially fitting on Mother’s Day...a mother hearted God whose love is both tender and fierce, gentle and strong, a God whose wings are vast enough to shelter all of us.

I wonder...what image of God are you being invited to notice or rediscover today? Perhaps you’re feeling a nudge to another way of experiencing or understanding God? In the sermon notes for this week, I have included some ideas for how you can explore this invitation more deeply.

I am going to end with a prayer by Sue Pickering, combined with a psalm by Joy Cowley:

O God of many names, teach us to be alert for new ways of naming your presence in our lives. Help us to let go of old punishing labels, carried for decades in the recesses of our souls. Within those spaces, may the fresh wind of your Spirit sing words of grace, helping us to see and name ourselves as beloved and precious in your sight.

God of the absurd,
Creator of the feeding of pelicans,
The flight of pukeko,
The departing of baboons,
The singing of peacocks
And the hurrying of camels,
God of everything quaint, funny, incongruous,
You are the God who made me
And knows me through and through.
No one better than you
Understands the contradictions
Of the sublime and the ridiculous
That is me. So, When I am experiencing the tension
Of opposites, and am buried deep
In self-examination, please stop me
From taking myself too seriously.
Tune my ear to the laughter
Of your Universe,
And help me to understand it
As my own.

AMEN





“Who do you say that I am?” Jesus asked his disciples, and the question is just as relevant to us as well. Much of our prayer, and how we live our life of faith, is influenced by the way that we view God. We are not talking here about a ‘right’ answer, but rather our (often subconscious) image of God that influences how we pray/live/relate to God on a daily basis.

Our image of God isn’t static either. As we grow and mature and we encounter things which challenge us or bring us joy, our view of God changes. How we relate to God as a five-year-old is different to how we relate as a teenager or in mid-life or in our 70s or 80s.

In the questions and pictures which follow there is an opportunity to explore your image of God. I encourage you not to rush – stay with the questions or the images that seem most important to you and ask God to speak to you through this process.

- **What images of God are least life-giving and most life-giving for you?**

Look through the pictures, or the list of biblical images of God. Scripture presents many images and metaphors for us to use in understanding who God is. These are just a few of them and you may think of others to add to this list.

Which images:

- Appeal to you
 - Surprise you
 - Make you feel uncomfortable
 - Reassure you
- **What is/are your main image (or images) of God at present? Does that surprise you?**
 - **How do your images of God impact your faith and prayer life?**
 - **Are there images of God that you would like to let go of?**

- Is there an image that God is inviting you to explore further?

Woman in labour Isaiah 42:14	Healer or doctor Psalm 147:3	Door or gate John 10:7
Potter Jeremiah 18	Rest giver Matthew 11:28-30	Shepherd Luke 15:4-7
Midwife Psalm 22:9-10	Water Isaiah 44:3; 55:1	Rock Psalm 18:31
Mother eagle Deuteronomy 32:10-12	Lamb John 1:29	Judge Genesis 18:25
Woman giving birth Deuteronomy 32:18	King Revelation 19:16	Bridegroom Matthew 25:1-13
The Way John 14:6	Lover Song of Solomon	Hen Matthew 23:37
Vine John 15	Mother Psalm 131:2; Isaiah 66:13	Shield Psalm 18:2
Fortress Psalm 31:2	Dove Matthew 3:16	Wind John 3:8
Fire Malachi 3:2; Hebrews 12:29	Mother bear Hosea 13:8	Homemaker Luke 15:8-10
Husband Isaiah 54:5	Light John 8:12	Nursing mother Isaiah 49:15; Numbers 11:12-13
Bread John 6:35	Wisdom Proverbs 8,9	Father Luke 15:11-32
Tree Hosea 14:8		





lamb



king



dove



father



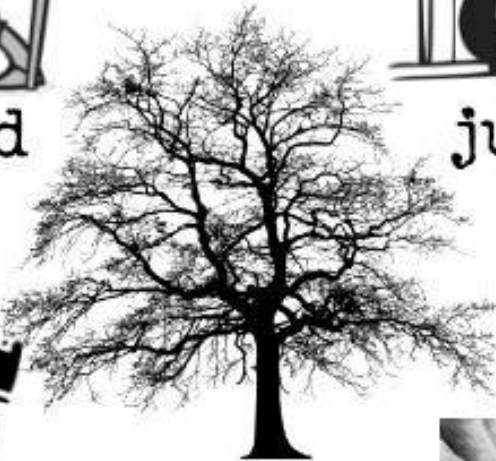
shield



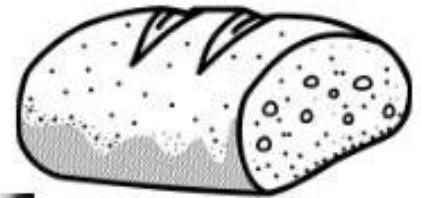
judge



shepherd



tree



bread



fortress



potter



lover



light



father



bridegroom



wind



counsellor



anchor



spy



artist



mother



guide



gardener



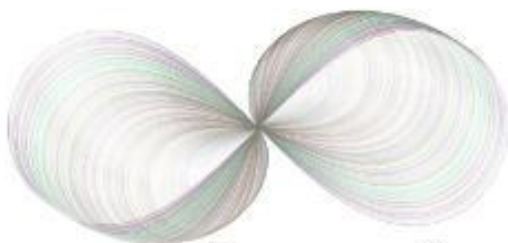
sacrifice



disciplinarian



holy



beyond words



puppet-master