

SACRED STORYTELLING: KNOWING GOD THROUGH THE PRACTICE OF
MOTHERING

by

Elizabeth Millar, BA, MTS

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AUTHOR: Elizabeth Millar

SUPERVISORS: Dr. Phil C. Zylla and Dr. Cynthia Long Westfall

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ABSTRACT

“Sacred Storytelling: Knowing God through the Practice of Mothering”

Elizabeth Millar
McMaster Divinity College
Hamilton, Ontario
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As a form of spiritual autobiography, sacred storytelling is the framework of deepening awareness and understanding of our own personal narratives within the story of God.

This project explores how sacred storytelling helps women articulate their understanding of God within the embodied spiritual practice of mothering. As a researcher and practical theologian, I seek to contribute further understanding of the theology within maternal narratives and sacred storytelling, particularly as it relates to mothering as a spiritual vocation.

This research project consists of interviewing ten women about their experience of mothering, focusing on what they know about God through the practice of mothering. The purpose of this research project is to foster an awareness of God and self within the spiritual practice of mothering and to promote sacred storytelling as a means of theological discovery. My research question is “What do women know about God through the practice of mothering?” followed by “How does sacred storytelling help women articulate their experience of God in the vocation of mothering?” This practical theological qualitative study explores the theology within women’s maternal narratives, as evidenced through sacred storytelling. Semi-structured interviews, accompanied with a photo elicitation method, are conducted with ten English-speaking Christian Canadian

women who are mothers. Participants are encouraged to tell their own experienced stories of God within the practice of mothering. Poetic analysis is used to analyze the interview transcripts and four major themes emerge: Presence of God, Divine Participation with God, Vulnerability of God, and the Unconditional Love of God. The majority of participants articulate their resonance with the natal Christ as part of their mothering experience and all participants speak of the birth of their children as a spiritually significant experience. I propose that the theology within these maternal narratives, alongside a philosophy of birth and a natal Christology, can strategically shape the mission of the church through a reorientation of God to the center, an embodiment of compassion, and the willingness to suffer.

DEDICATION

To the five beautiful people who make me a mother.
Alexandria, Gabriel, Hazel, Sophia, and Simon –
your existence is a miracle and a gift.
From the minute I knew you were a possibility, I have thanked God for you.

To my dear Mum who gave me the gift of life.
I'm so grateful for your sense of adventure that took a young British midwife to the
Canadian prairies to marry a farmer and mother seven children.
To my Dad who suddenly passed away with Covid-19
just as I began this doctorate journey.
Thank you for lending your *Preaching Today* cassette tapes and
Leadership magazines to me as a teenager.
I inherently adopted your love for the church.

To my dear Mother-in-law who taught me how to take a genuine interest in people.
Your friendship has meant the world to me.
To my Father-in-law who prays every day for his family.
Thank you.

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To Paul. I so love the way we say “yes” to each other. Love always. XO

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INTRODUCTION

Topic and General Context

The context of this research project is the spiritual practice of mothering and its more specific focus is the theology within maternal narratives. It is sacred storytelling that uncovers and reveals the theology of God that is known and experienced by women through the practice of mothering. Sacred storytelling as understood within the ministry of spiritual direction, is a form of spiritual autobiography that gives testimony to the truth about God and the truth about ourselves. As we hear the stories of women, we gain insight into the spiritual practice of mothering as a theological site of discovery.

Spiritual autobiographical writing, which is currently lacking in terms of maternal narratives, is important in that it allows the author to explore who she is and who God is in a narrative form.¹ Women's life writing in the form of sacred storytelling is an accessible and practical type of spiritual autobiographical writing. Women, especially older women, need to be reminded that their stories matter, to claim their voice, and to realize that their ordinary lives are not exempt from the divine presence of God.² Mothering is an embodied spiritual practice that yields an understanding of God

¹ The lack of maternal life writing will be further explored in "Chapter 2: Mothering and Everyday Spirituality."

² Moschella, "Spiritual Autobiography and Older Adults," 96.

and self.³ It is maternal narratives that “make visible some of the spiritual challenges and insights” embedded in practices of mothering.⁴ Therefore, mothering is a source of theological understanding, and it is sacred storytelling that helps women understand and articulate their particular understanding of God.

Purpose and Aim of the Research

In the ministry of spiritual direction, sacred storytelling is the framework of deepening awareness and understanding of our own personal narratives within the story of God. This project explores how sacred storytelling helps women articulate their understanding of God within the embodied spiritual practice of mothering. As a researcher and practical theologian, I seek to contribute further understanding of the theology within maternal narratives and sacred storytelling, particularly as it relates to mothering as a spiritual vocation.

This research project consists of interviewing ten women about their experience of mothering, focusing on what they know about God through the practice of mothering. The purpose of this research project is to foster an awareness of God and self within the spiritual practice of mothering and to promote sacred storytelling as a means of theological discovery. My research question is “What do women know about God through the practice of mothering?” followed by “How does sacred storytelling help women articulate their experience of God in the vocation of mothering?”

³ Leading voices and pioneers such as Claire Wolfteich, Bonnie Miller-McLemore, Dorothy Bass, Heather Walton, and Nicola Slee have done focused research and writing around practical theology and the spirituality of mothering.

⁴ Wolfteich, *Mothering*, 24.

Key Terms and Concepts

Sacred Storytelling

Since women's life writing remains "a rather untapped resource for practical theology" and little research has been done on mothering as a spiritual practice, I will focus on sacred storytelling within the vocation of mothering.⁵ The term "sacred tales," used by spiritual director Janet K. Ruffing, refers to the narratives of God and self which are expressed and reflected upon in the practice of spiritual direction.⁶ Rather than spiritual autobiographies that encompass one's entire life, such as Augustine's *Confessions* or *The Hiding Place* by Corrie ten Boom, sacred storytelling is a specific form of spiritual autobiographical writing under the umbrella of women's life writing for this project. Sacred tales are short, episodic in nature, and tell of one's unique spiritual experience in ordinary life. Thus, sacred storytelling is the most appropriate term for my research in that it captures the fragmented nature of spiritual autobiographical writing, rather than a unified spiritual life story.

A sacred story is essentially a creation story "that actually creates the consciousness of those who live within this particular story."⁷ Philosopher Stephen Crites states that the "formal quality of experience through time is inherently narrative," and makes a distinction between sacred stories and mundane stories.⁸ He defines sacred stories as those that create our sense of self and the world and project a "total world

⁵ Wolfeich, *Mothering*, 15.

⁶ Ruffing, *To Tell the Sacred Tale*, 21.

⁷ Ruffing, *To Tell the Sacred Tale*, 73.

⁸ Crites, "Narrative Quality of Experience," 291.

horizon”.⁹ Mundane stories are those set within the world in which we live.¹⁰ For the purposes of the research project, mundane tales refer to the meaning-making stories of God and self as narrated by the participants while the sacred story is the Christian understanding of the biblical narrative.

There are challenges to accessing women’s spiritual autobiographical writings—particularly due to “the dearth of sources, [and] the hermeneutical silences encountered even in texts written by mothers.”¹¹ Frankly, there is not an overwhelming pool of women’s life writing to draw from and even when women recorded their life experience, mothering was often not deemed important enough to include. Practical theologian Wolfeich encourages other researchers and academics to find “creative entry points into life writing for contemporary women,” therefore, sacred tales (in the form of poetic representations constructed from the research interviews) are a creative and fresh form of women’s life writings.¹² Interviewing women who have engaged in the practice of mothering, constructing poetic sacred tales using the women’s own words, and then having the women affirm their own poetic sacred tales is a form of life writing that places the work load of listening, gathering, and constructing on the researcher, but gives women a clear voice. For women who do not feel like they have the time, skills, or even desire to write about their own experiences of mothering, this research project encourages and allows for them to reflect and speak their sacred tales.

⁹ Crites, “Narrative Quality of Experience,” 296.

¹⁰ Although the term “mundane” carries a deprecatory tone, this is unintended. ‘Mundane’ simply refers to the often ordinary or everyday stories that create a sense of self and an understanding of God within the sacred story. Crites, “The Narrative Quality of Experience,” 295–96.

¹¹ Wolfeich, *Mothering*, 168.

¹² As a point of interest, in Wolfeich’s Spiritual Autobiography course that she teaches at Boston University, she expands life writing to include personal letter writing and poetic forms of writing, along with artistic and performative expressions. (*Mothering*, 169).

Spiritual Direction

Since sacred storytelling arises from a spiritual direction context, it is helpful to define spiritual direction. The term “spiritual direction” is essentially conversation between a directee and director, in the acknowledged presence of the Spirit, wherein the directee seeks “to focus on awareness of and response to God in one’s life.”¹³ The central activity that occurs in spiritual direction is “telling the unique story of God and self”.¹⁴ Directees express their religious experience and reflect on the meaning and implication of that experience, resulting in greater self-knowledge and deeper intimacy with God. Christian spiritual direction can be defined as the “help given by one Christian to another which enables that person to pay attention to God’s personal communication to him or her, to respond to this personally communicating God, to grow in intimacy with this God, and to live out the consequences of the relationship.”¹⁵ In addition, “holy listening, presence, and attentiveness” are key to spiritual direction, clarifying that spiritual direction is not pastoral counselling or mutual friendship. Instead, the director covenants to put herself aside to be fully present to the directee.¹⁶ Though God and God’s activity in one’s life is the primary focus, all of one’s life experience can be part of the conversation since God is the “deepest dimension of all experience.”¹⁷ For this project, it is the practice of mothering that provides the perimeters within the human experience.

¹³ Fischer, *Women at the Well*, 3.

¹⁴ Ruffing, *To Tell the Sacred Tale*, 2.

¹⁵ Barry and Connolly, *Practice of Spiritual Direction*, 8.

¹⁶ Guenther, *Holy Listening*, 1, 3.

¹⁷ Fischer, *Women at the Well*, 3.

Experiences of God as Revelations

There are moments in our ordinary life that highlight the intersection between God's story and our story.¹⁸ There is a sense of something more, something other-worldly. From a Christian spirituality view, we say that God is present to describe a spiritually significant experience.¹⁹ While God is always present, there are times when God seems more present as we are more aware of the presence of God from our human perspective. It is these *more present* times that are the focus of this project and, throughout Christian history, these experiences have been named as spiritual consolation, transcendence, and revelation (my preferred term).

In the biblical narrative of Jacob's dream of wrestling with God, he wakes the next morning and says, "Surely God was in this place" (Gen 28:6). The dream is an experience of the awareness of God for Jacob. In the gospel narrative of the men on the road to Emmaus, they recognized something more about their conversation with the stranger and later say, "Were not our hearts burning within us?" (Luke 24:13–35). Their awareness of God is expressed as a physical experience. Ecclesiastes 3:10 calls it "eternity in our hearts" and C. S. Lewis refers to it as a nostalgic or inconsolable

¹⁸ We need tools of discernment as we pay attention to the presence of God in our ordinary lives. A spiritual director and longtime Professor of Spiritual Life at San Francisco Theological Seminary, Elizabeth Liebert offers seven tangible approaches to discernment that de-mystify this somewhat nebulous idea of seeing God. Paying attention not only involves intentionality but requires a practical way forward. Although her book is more aimed at the discernment required for decision making, she identifies seven approaches (reason, imagination, nature, body, religious affections, memory, and intuition) that transfer nicely over to the art of paying attention to the presence of God in our everyday lives. Liebert helps us to know how to look. Although her book *The Way of Discernment: Spiritual Practices for Decision Making* is more about discernment, it is a practical gift for anyone wondering how to pay attention to God in everyday life.

¹⁹ Johnston describes his own experiences of revelation (such as sitting alone under the stars near Lake Arrowhead in Southern California or hearing the tragic story of a man with an "iron lung"), noting that these experiences of God's self-revelation are personal, yet universal. I argue that all of us have experienced such moments, though not all would attribute them to an experience of God. (*God's Wider Presence*, xv).

longing.²⁰ Julian of Norwich calls these experiences of revelation as “sweet touches and sweet spiritual glimpses.”²¹ She instructs her readers that “God wants us to pay attention to his gracious touch, rejoicing in his unconditional love.”²² It is these experiences which remind us that there is more than the material world.

In his *Spiritual Exercises*, St. Ignatius describes spiritual consolation as “an increase in hope, faith, and charity, and every interior joy which calls and attracts one toward heavenly things and to the salvation of one’s soul, by bringing it tranquility and peace in its Creator and Lord.”²³ He adds that it is only God who can “give the soul consolation without a preceding cause.”²⁴ Ignatius encourages his readers to pay attention to those experiences of consolation as interior movements toward God, noting that they often occur without an overt explanation. I would also add that experiences of desolation request our attention because they alert us to an interior movement away from God. Both consolation and desolation are divine signals that invite our attention.

According to Spanish Jesuit theologian Francisco Suarez, “without prior cause” and “disproportion” are two key features of consolation which point to the presence of God in ordinary life.²⁵ Those experiences which produce an interior movement of exaggerated response or occur without reasonable explanation require our attention and

²⁰ Lewis, *Weight of Glory*, 42.

²¹ Starr, *Julian of Norwich: The Showings*, 108.

²² Starr, *Julian of Norwich: The Showings*, 216.

²³ Ganss, ed., *Ignatius of Loyola*, 202.

²⁴ Ganss, ed., *Ignatius of Loyola*, 205.

²⁵ Brackley refers to Francisco Suarez’s original work *De Religione Societatis Jesu*, (L. IX, cap. V, nn. 38–41), which describes consolation more fully. However, these two phrases alone capture the essence of what is needed for this paper. I would also add that it is through both experiences of consolation and disconsolation marked by disproportion and without prior cause that we can experience the presence of God. (*Call to Discernment*, 138–39).

further theological reflection. An ordinary experience like reading a bedtime story to a child or nursing an infant has the potential to be particularly significant.

Experiences of God are not always easy to describe. Borrowing philosopher Michael Polanyi's concept of tacit knowing, Ruffing explains that an experience of God is "usually an awareness of God that is limited neither to sensory nor to intellectual factors, but is, nonetheless, present in awareness. If our experience of God over time is preconceptual or 'tacit,' there are always some aspects of it that cannot be put into words but that are, nonetheless, real."²⁶ Therefore, for this project, the term "revelation" will be used to identify an experience in our personal narratives in which there is either a tacit or explicit awareness of God as God is revealed in a particular way.

Narrative theologian George W. Stroup defines revelation as "the unveiling or disclosure of a reality that is not accessible to human discovery and which is of decisive significance for human destiny and well-being."²⁷ Stroup identifies three aspects of revelation: It is a disclosure, it is not initiated by human will or accessible to human inquiry and investigation, and it is God who does the disclosing.²⁸ Therefore, a revelation is redemptive for those who participate in and respond to it as it is also "a statement about the grace of God."²⁹ Revelation captures the notion of God revealing Godself to humans which results in an increased knowledge of God.

Researcher's Assumptions

²⁶ Ruffing, *To Tell the Sacred Tale*, 79.

²⁷ Stroup, *Promise of Narrative Theology*, 42.

²⁸ Stroup, *Promise of Narrative Theology*, 42–43.

²⁹ Stroup, *Promise of Narrative Theology*, 43–44.

The first premise for this research study is that mothering is a spiritual practice.

According to Wolfeich, mothering is a deeply embodied spiritual practice, even a form of spiritual exercise, that is essentially both a demanding and abundant way of life.³⁰

Because mothering has often been dismissed or not recognized as a spiritual practice, experiences of God within this practice go unnoticed and unspoken. Miller-McLemore argues that our awareness of the theological nature of the ordinary (particularly the domestic life) needs to be revived once again because parenting and homemaking are indeed spiritual practices.³¹ This dismissal of mothering as a spiritual experience is experienced and expressed by the research participants which prompt their eagerness to participate in the project.

The second premise is that storytelling makes our implicit experience with God explicit by telling the story. The narrative nature of spiritual direction relies on this assumption. Considering how our particular story intersects with the larger divine narrative allows for increased understanding of ourselves and God. Ruffing states that the “story told in direction is an oral version of spiritual autobiography; directees gradually construct their spiritual identity narratives when they tell a story of God in and through their own life stories.”³² Storytelling is a way in which we can know God and know and become ourselves.

Feminist Perspective

³⁰ Wolfeich, *Mothering*, 4.

³¹ Miller-McLemore, *In the Midst of Chaos*, 23.

³² Ruffing, *To Tell the Sacred Tale*, 135.

This project will be approached from a feminist perspective, as the subject matter is the experiences of women and it serves to listen to women's voices. Although it is for women specifically, listening to maternal narratives and learning from the theology within them is for both men and women. A feminist perspective also influences the way in which research is conducted, as it values transparency, honesty of the involvement of the researcher, and an appreciation for innovation and creativity. Walton notes that a feminist perspective is important to acknowledge because "the world looks different according to the place from which it is viewed," which in this research project will be the place of mothering.³³ Miller-McLemore argues that "feminist and womanist thought has exposed the misogyny embedded in tradition and institutions that have characterized women as emotionally juvenile, morally and intellectually inferior, and spiritually evil."³⁴ However, the term feminist is ambiguous; therefore, I will use Graham's approach to feminist theory with its emphasis on themes of protest, affirmation, and new creation in feminist practical theology.³⁵ This project will listen to women as an act of resistance to androcentric models of spiritual autobiographical writing, acknowledge mothering experience as a valid source of theological discovery, and seek to integrate everyday life as a mother and experiential knowledge of God.

While the research project will be focused on women's mothering experience, the insights gained regarding sacred storytelling will serve "as a model for wholeness for both women and men."³⁶ The theology within the maternal narratives holds universal truth that goes beyond women's experience within the practice of mothering. Instead,

³³ Walton, *Writing Methods*, xvii.

³⁴ Miller-McLemore, "Feminist Theory in Pastoral Theology," 78.

³⁵ Graham, "Feminist Theory," 194.

³⁶ Fischer, *Women at the Well*, 2.

what women know about God through mothering is practical and informative for the church as a whole, especially in regard to understanding and implementing missional activity.

Protest, Affirmation, and New Creation

The themes of protest, affirmation and new creation appropriately characterize feminist practical theological scholarship.³⁷ First, a feminist approach protests against the indifference and dismissal of women, which has made women invisible, overlooked, and disregarded. Women's voices break the silence and insist on being heard. In a small way, this research project invites women to break the silence around their mothering experiences. One participant thanked me for the opportunity to be a part of the project because "no one has ever asked me these questions." Another participant was grateful that I took mothering seriously, while I can confidently say that all participants appreciated the chance to speak about a practice that they thought was valuable, but not often affirmed by others. Their participation, storytelling, and theological discoveries were a gentle but confident protest amidst a male-dominated field. The diversity of women's experiences, however, is complex and cannot be generalized. One woman cannot speak for all women. In fact, a feminist approach welcomes collaboration and depends on "nonadversarial, even relational constructive interactions."³⁸ For this to happen, multiple women voices are required, without threat of judgement or shame, as the lived experience of women is not singular in nature. Miller-McLemore in *Also a Mother* says, "I, for one, want to hear other voices, voices different from my own."³⁹

³⁷ Graham, "Feminist Theory," 194.

³⁸ Miller-McLemore, "Feminist Theory in Pastoral Theology," 89.

³⁹ Miller-McLemore, *Also a Mother*, 15.

Likewise, I would endorse further research regarding the amplification of voices for previously silenced populations and further investigation regarding everyday spiritual practices.

Second, this research study affirms the practice of mothering and a feminine storytelling voice. The stories are not argumentative, dogmatic, or based on reason and proof. Rather, they are often personal, deeply grounded in the intimacies of their most valued relationships, and some have never been told. There is a trust between the participants and myself as the researcher that I do not take lightly. It is a privilege to affirm the participants in this important part of their life. As one participant said, “mothering is the thing that I am most proud of.”

Lastly, my hope is that this research project will be part of a much larger transformation of church, academia, and society. The theology within the maternal narratives as revealed through sacred storytelling has the potential to create new realities for the church and academia especially. Though academia and church have historically considered (and continue to consider) women (and mothering) with ambivalence, careful study and reflection of the lived experiences of women hold such possibility for theological discovery.

Reflexivity in Practice-Led Research

As a key distinctive of practical theology, reflexivity is an intentional form of engagement on behalf of the researcher. In general, reflexivity relates to “a process of disclosure and dialogue that is intended to make evident the situated and interested nature of academic work.”⁴⁰ Pete Ward’s particular form of reflexivity is centered

⁴⁰ Ward, *Participation and Mediation*, 3.

around autobiography, which he calls “auto/theobiography.”⁴¹ The researcher’s experience, theological convictions, and personal story are acknowledged and explored in order for the research to be properly situated and understood. Practical theology is not abstract or objective, but rather is very much influenced by our own life story.⁴² As one’s own biases and experience are acknowledged, reflexivity does not only make for more honest research, but it opens the door to increased awareness of and experience with God on behalf of the researcher.

Reflexivity is a requirement for feminist practical theology, or as Jan Berry says, “the use of the self in feminist research is not an optional extra, it is at the heart of the research process.”⁴³ Slee argues that being aware of ourselves as researchers and making that part of the research process increases the objectivity of the research, rather than the subjectivity.⁴⁴ It is lack of transparency and unawareness on behalf of the researcher that can easily skew the research process, and thus, the results. Therefore, locating oneself within the research is necessary for feminist practical theology, which includes such practices as writing in the first-person, showing how the research changed throughout the course of the project, and being honest about mistakes, hunches, surprises, and one’s feelings throughout the process. As Slee says, “feminists seek integrity within the research enterprise and work to establish a new set of conventions in the world of

⁴¹ Ward, *Participation and Mediation*, 4.

⁴² Ward’s emphasis on reflexivity was influenced by his experience as a theology student. While he appreciated the lectures, he noticed (and grieved) the lack of (even discouragement to make) personal connection to his own spiritual life and practice. The Introduction chapter (1–29) tells his journey towards reflexivity, as he realizes that it is only through reflexive engagement with his studies and practical ministry that he can participate (and mediate) “the missional dance of the Trinity.” (*Participation and Mediation*, 28).

⁴³ Berry, “Writing the Self,” 214.

⁴⁴ Slee, *Women’s Faith Development*, 51.

scholarship which will demand, and not merely allow, the statement of the conditions of production under which knowledge is pursued.”⁴⁵

As per Ward’s encouragement, Berry’s instruction, and Slee’s challenge for academic rigor, I will include an autobiographical introduction and my interests and motivation for choosing this particular topic as part of the research project.⁴⁶ My own sacred stories will be woven throughout as I interact with the research process and the data that is produced from the participants’ interviews. Lastly, my personal reflections will constitute part of the conclusion.⁴⁷

Autobiographical Introduction

While distance and objectivity were once highly valued in academia, the pendulum has now swung towards more personal and individual investment in the research process.⁴⁸ Therefore, I will include my personal story and theological convictions as a brief introduction. I am a wife to Paul and mother to our five children. Pregnancy, childbirth, breast feeding, and mothering are some of my favourite memories. In fact, my feminist spirit was born during those early years of mothering as I experienced the great wonders that my maternal body was capable of. After giving birth to our 10 lb 2oz daughter in a Canadian Tire blow-up swimming pool in our living room one February morning, I asked my husband if he was jealous of me and the amazing things I could do: (he was not jealous, but he too was in awe). I celebrated my years of pregnancy and childbirth by

⁴⁵ Slee, *Women’s Faith Development*, 52.

⁴⁶ Berry, “Writing the Self,” 205.

⁴⁷ Berry writes that reflexivity requires that “the writer not only shares her own interpretation and analysis of the material she has gathered, but also makes visible and transparent the impact that the process of research and writing has had on her.” (“Writing the Self,” 207).

⁴⁸ Walton pushes the personal voice beyond social location (gender, race, social class, and so on) to include “extended autobiographical and imaginative passages” which explain the researcher’s motivation, desires, challenges, and reflections. (*Writing Methods*, 97).

quietly making birth related art, like a belly cast and placenta prints. These art pieces remind me of the miracle of birth that I was able to participate in.

Through pregnancy and giving birth, I gained a new respect for the female body and began a 20-year journey of discerning what God thought about women and how God wanted men and women to interact with each other. Growing up in a strict complementarian environment, a woman's role was ascribed as helper and marked by submission and often silence. Marriage, childbearing, and home making were often upheld as the preferred honorable and godly roles for women. It is ironic to note that it was within these experiences, that those views of the role of women were challenged for me. As a result of my mothering experience, theological study, and reflecting on the presence of God in my own life through spiritual direction, I believe that women and men reflect the image of God and are to fully participate according to their gifts in the work of the church.

I was somewhat reluctant to focus on the practice of mothering, with fear that a research project focused on the practice of mothering would be dismissed as interesting but unimportant, and, consequently, be relegated to the women to read, but not useful for the whole church. As a doctoral student, it has taken time and theological reflection to come to peace with my background as a mother and educator, especially in light of the male-dominated academic circles I am swimming in. However, this is who I am. So, it is with a desire for authenticity and a sense of humility, but also pride, that I delve into something (mothering) I am familiar with but want to understand further. Mothering is only one of the ordinary spiritual practices that deserve our theological attention. There are many practices within everyday spirituality that invite further theological reflection. The problem is that everyday spirituality is, well, ordinary. I remember the astonishment

I felt as I looked for God in Scripture, nature, community, and so on and then realized that my own ordinary existence was also be a place where God could be known. The dramatic and sensational have their place, but most of us live ordinary lives most of the time and God is present.

Storytelling as a spiritual practice and as a way of knowing comes much more naturally. Twenty years of teaching with the Charlotte Mason philosophy taught me that narration was an effective method of learning.⁴⁹ Spiritual direction convinces me that knowing our own stories and how they intersect with the divine is key to experiencing God. Whether one is 25 or 75, there is a desire to not only know God intellectually, but experientially as well.⁵⁰ I think we all desire to have our own stories of the presence of God in our own lives that go beyond our conversion story. Now, as storyteller for *Vision Ministries Canada*, I interview church leaders across Canada and tell their stories of God at work in their churches and communities, in order to acknowledge God and to encourage other leaders.

Before the research project, I suspected that women knew something about God, thanks to their unique biology. I wrongly assumed that it might center around God as helper and a source of strength and as mothering as primarily a spiritual formation exercise. Instead, I was delighted to learn that the theology within the participants' stories was richer and thicker than I anticipated. God's delight and affirmation of women and the spiritual practice of mothering has been evident through this project. My

⁴⁹ Briefly, a Charlotte Mason philosophy of education emphasizes personhood, nurturing the whole child, uses living books, and relies on narration. This philosophy is developed further in Chapter 1.

⁵⁰ One of Marion Milner's discoveries in her psychoanalytical experiment as recorded in *A Life of One's Own* was that "there is all the difference in the world between knowing something intellectually and knowing it as a 'lived' experience. This is a truism but none the less of vital importance. The more I read scientific books on psychology the more I felt that the essential facts of experience were being missed out." (*A Life of One's Own*, xxxiv).

suspicions were confirmed that women knew God in a deep intellectual and experiential way.

Transition to Storytelling

Chapter 1 will explore understanding reality through a narrative lens, beginning with our own lives. Then, knowing through narrative will be investigated from five different viewpoints—practical theologian Graham, epistemological philosopher Meek, learning theorist Mason, spiritual director Ruffing, and pastoral theologian Moschella. Finally, I will focus on the Incarnation as a key theological construct within the biblical narrative of Scripture as the great connection between our human existence and God.

CHAPTER 1: STORYTELLING AND UNDERSTANDING REALITY THROUGH A NARRATIVE LENS

A narrative lens helps us understand reality—ourselves, the act of knowing, and God. First, life as narrative will be explored, followed by an exploration of the intersection between theology and autobiography. What role does the divine play in making sense of our own narratives? How do these two narratives—the divine and the human—interact with each other? The story of God is a space that welcomes our human stories, as we recognize and make sense of our dual identity. Then, Herbert Anderson and Edward Foley’s approach of weaving together the divine and the human shows the meaning making purpose of narrative. Further, I will explore narration or storytelling as a way to understand the act of knowing, as demonstrated by practical theologian Graham, philosopher Meek, educational theorist Mason, spiritual director Ruffing, and pastoral theologian Moschella. Finally, the biblical narrative will provide the framework for understanding all of reality and the theological underpinnings of the research project. As a particular key event, the narrative of the Incarnation will act as the core construct, offering the theological basis for God’s interest in and interaction with our personal narratives and thus, sacred storytelling. The Incarnation will be viewed as the Great Connection—between the invisible and visible, divinity and humanity, the sacred and the secular, and finally, faith or imagination and reason. These connections then lead us to everyday spirituality and sacred storytelling.

Narrative and Human Experience

Life as Narrative

Cognitive psychologist and educational theorist Bruner argues that we organize our human experience mainly in the form of narrative.¹ Rather than reason or logic, we use narrative to express and make sense of our own lives. Bruner's key thesis in regard to autobiography is that "we seem to have no other way of describing 'lived time' save in the form of a narrative."² There is a constructive aspect in the selection and interpretation of life events as we narrate our story. Making note of this hermeneutic aspect of storytelling, "narratives do not exist, waiting there patiently and eternally to be veridically mirrored in a text;" instead, the "events themselves need to be constituted in the light of the overall narrative."³ Spiritual autobiographical writing is not then merely a telling of historical events; rather, it involves interpretation and a making sense of the events in one's life.

The way we tell our stories becomes the recipe as to how we structure experience itself.⁴ It is a constructivist approach, which goes beyond a descriptive account of one's life. Narrative is the way that we recount our lives but, more importantly, it is the way we make meaning of our lives as we interpret our experience. Therefore, autobiographical writing is more complex than simply telling one's story. According to Bruner,

Eventually the culturally shaped cognitive and linguistic processes that guide the self-telling of life narratives achieve the power to structure perceptual experience, to organize memory, to segment and purpose-build the very "events"

¹ Bruner, "Narrative Construction of Reality," 4.

² Bruner, "Life as Narrative," 692.

³ Bruner, "Narrative Construction of Reality," 8.

⁴ Bruner, "Life as Narrative," 708.

of a life. In the end, we *become* the autobiographical narratives by which we ‘tell about’ our lives.⁵

Essentially, “recounting one’s life is an interpretive feat” and autobiography is the way we make our lives.⁶ Even more bluntly, Bruner argues that “a life is not ‘how it was’ but how it is interpreted and reinterpreted, told and retold.”⁷

Autobiography and Theology

Viewing our own lives in a narrative sense makes us consider the interesting relationship between autobiography and theology. The purpose of storytelling is to “tell us something about life, not to prove something,” as its primary goal is “authenticity, not factuality, although the latter is not ignored.”⁸ Truthfulness plays an important role in storytelling, but it is the search for meaning that is the primary purpose of any narrative. Downey acknowledges that there is a suspicion towards meta-narratives, specifically theological narratives based on Scripture, as ill-fitting and over-generalized, but as human beings we “continue to search for coherence in our existence, which is in essence grasping for some form of metanarrative.”⁹ Our desire for meaning and purpose persists that can only be satisfied by a story bigger than ourselves. Downey’s encouragement is to tell our particular stories as part of the bigger divine story with careful attention and humble acknowledgement that due to its nature, an universal story cannot be completely humanly understood. To believe so would incite “unrealistic and unhelpful expectations.”¹⁰ Though there is suffering because our story fragments are incomplete

⁵ Bruner, “Life as Narrative,” 694.

⁶ Bruner, “Life as Narrative,” 693.

⁷ Bruner, “Life as Narrative,” 708.

⁸ Downey, “Perspective on Narrative Theology,” 295.

⁹ Downey, “Perspective on Narrative Theology,” 300.

¹⁰ Downey, “Perspective on Narrative Theology,” 300.

and obscure, there is a sense of hope as they are understood within the universal narrative of God.

The biblical narrative places a high importance on the autobiographical. The biblical narrative differs from other ancient Near Eastern mythologies in this way, in that the biblical narrative is essentially made up of the stories of specific people, such as Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.¹¹ “The telling of one’s life is the telling of faith,” as evidenced by the lives and stories of Sarah, Ruth, Esther, Mary, the woman at the well, Lydia, and more.¹² Consequently, spiritual autobiographical storytelling has continued through church history to the present time. As part of the Christian faith, the tradition of personal narratives continue to be viewed as important.

While Colby Dickinson argues that our autobiographies are somehow theological, David McMillan counters that theology is interpreted autobiographically. McMillan explores the different readings of Scripture as seen through three generations (his parents, his own, his daughter), recognizing that “all our theology is autobiographical”.¹³ As demonstrated by his own story of understanding 1 Pet 2:9–10, knowledge of God is intricately connected to knowledge of self. His parents’ interpretation of the Scripture passage differs from his own, as does his from his daughter’s understanding. Their understanding of God is very much connected with their own stories and their particular social and historical context. According to McMillan, the “preferred proclamation of the text is the telling of our own stories” or our testimonies.¹⁴ The link between theology and autobiography, therefore, must be carefully determined.

¹¹ Dickinson, *Theology as Autobiography*, 23.

¹² Dickinson, *Theology as Autobiography*, 26.

¹³ McMillan, “Theology as Autobiography,” 33.

¹⁴ McMillan, “Theology as Autobiography,” 33.

The Hermeneutical Question

The question then becomes—what is the connection between autobiography and theology? How do we understand our human narrative and the divine narrative? Stroup claims that the Christian faith involves the “reinterpretation of one’s personal identity and the alteration of one’s daily existence.”¹⁵ The divine narrative invites the person to consider how their story and personal self-identity may be reconstructed, in light of their experienced revelations or knowledge of God. One of the strengths of narrative theology is that it goes beyond storytelling and “provides a foundation for theology by uniting experience and reflection in a way that other recent forms of systematic theology apparently have been unable to do.”¹⁶ Narrative theology recognizes that the Christian faith is

rooted in particular historical events which are recounted in the narratives of Christian Scripture and tradition, that these historical narratives and the faith they spawn are redemptive when they are appropriated at the level of personal identity and experience. Hence, Christian narrative is a primary datum for theological reflection and the appropriate context in which to re-examine the nature of Christian identity and what Christians mean by ‘revelation’.¹⁷

The relationship between the divine narrative and our personal narratives is complex but in the Christian faith, they are inextricably joined. Stroup says that “all true self-knowledge requires knowledge of God but knowledge of God is sterile and ‘academic’ unless it discloses true knowledge of self.”¹⁸ Therefore, it becomes a hermeneutical question as to how we interpret our human narratives and understand the encounter between the divine and human narrative. For Christian spirituality, “the God in whom

¹⁵ Stroup, *Promise of Narrative Theology*, 18.

¹⁶ Stroup, *Promise of Narrative Theology*, 17.

¹⁷ Stroup, *Promise of Narrative Theology*, 17.

¹⁸ Stroup, *Promise of Narrative Theology*, 19.

one lives and moves is the decisive reality for the true and proper articulation of personal identity and the interpretation of the meaning and structure of one's world."¹⁹ In the Christian understanding, we cannot know ourselves without an understanding of the divine story.

After class one day, a fellow student stopped and asked me if my job was actually that of a storyteller. I explained that I work for my church network as their storyteller, with the mandate to interview church leaders across the country and write their stories of God at work in their churches and communities for social media. His face was awash with surprise and curiosity. Then he looked at me somewhat suspiciously, and asked, "Who is the main character in your stories?" I smiled, "It is God. God is the main character." He nodded his head and smiled back, "Yes."

Narrative as Weaving Together the Human and the Divine

Stories of God as an Open Space

R. Ruard Ganzevoort lays out three ways our human stories may interact with the story of God. First, the stories of God express our own human stories. Second, the stories of God act prophetically and confront our own stories. The third approach, however, is more evocative and proposes that the interaction between the divine story and the human story requires theological reflection for more complete understanding. Ganzevoort proposes that in this third approach "the stories of God offer an open space where we can bring and reflect on our own stories."²⁰ The power of a story is that a story invites its listeners into a different world and different vantage point. Therefore, the biblical

¹⁹ Stroup, *Promise of Narrative Theology*, 20.

²⁰ Ganzevoort, "Narrative Approaches," 219.

narrative provides the space in which we can see and understand ourselves and our personal narratives from a God-view.

Storyteller and theologian Frederick Buechner points out that, according to the biblical narrative, story is a dominant form of communication for Jesus. There is an invitational quality about narrative that allows listeners or readers to consider things beyond what is visible and immediate. Particularly for the stories of Jesus, there is a wooing to behold the mystery of the divine and the human. Buechner notes that

Jesus does not sound like Saint Paul or Thomas Aquinas or John Calvin when we hear him teaching in the Gospels. ‘Once upon a time’ is what he says. Once upon a time somebody went out to plant some seeds. Once upon a time somebody stubbed a toe on a great treasure. Once upon a time somebody lost a precious coin. The Gospels are full of the stories Jesus tells, stories that are alive in somewhat the way the truth is alive, the way he himself is alive when Pilate asks him about truth, and his silence is a way of saying ‘Look at my aliveness if you want to know! Listen to my life!’ Matthew goes so far as to tell us that ‘he said nothing to them without a parable,’ that is to say without a story, and then quotes the words, ‘I will open my mouth in parables, I will utter what has been hidden since the foundation of the world.’ In stories the hiddenness and the utterance are both present, and that is another reason why they are a good way of talking about God’s truth which is part hidden and part uttered too.²¹

Temporal Identity and Eschatological Identity

Pastoral counsellor Gerkin also understands humans as storytellers. In fact, he says that pastoral counselors are “listeners and interpreters of stories” as people meet with pastoral counselors to tell, untangle, interpret, confirm, and search for meaning in their lives.²² Intertwining human life and God, we exist within the history of God, creation, and other human relationships. Gerkin identifies two contextual levels for understanding

²¹ Buechner, *Clown in the Belfry*, 131.

²² Gerkin, *Living Human Document*, 26.

our human existence, being the finite temporal and the eschatological.²³ Leaning on Jürgen Moltmann's trinitarian theology, Gerkin proposes that our relationship with God is paradoxical. On one hand, there is the empirical historical human experience; on the other hand, there is the eschatological reality of God and the kingdom of God. Our human identity is therefore paradoxical, as we understand our historical experience as it is embedded in the eschatological reality.²⁴ In terms of sacred storytelling, the temporal identity finds itself within the eschatological identity, as the eschatological identity is the larger framework which is the controlling interpretation. It is the Spirit of God which mediates and gives understanding between history and eschatology.²⁵ For sacred storytelling, this dual identity (temporal and eschatological) requires attention to both the human and the divine story, and the intersection of those two stories.

Narrative as Meaning Making

As part of our being human, we tell stories due to the narrative structure of our lives and we "cannot and need not escape the narrative structure of human life."²⁶ The purpose of narrative is not only an organization of one's life events, but to make meaning. We tell stories of our lives to establish meaning to integrate our past with our present situation, while anticipating the future.²⁷ Pastoral care theologian Anderson and professor of liturgy and music Foley argue that storytelling is a ritual that transforms because we begin to understand our particular story within a larger metanarrative: "God has chosen

²³ Gerkin, *Living Human Document*, 67.

²⁴ Gerkin, *Living Human Document*, 67.

²⁵ Gerkin, *Living Human Document*, 70.

²⁶ Anderson and Foley, *Mighty Stories*, 19.

²⁷ Anderson and Foley, *Mighty Stories*, 5.

to coauthor a redemptive story for us and with us in human history, and in so doing has invited us to reshape radically the horizon of all other storytelling and ritual making”.²⁸ It is the weaving together of these two narratives that is essential for meaning making. The divine and human narrative reveal a mutual desire for each other and holds the possibility of human transformation as we find our place within God’s story. This encounter between the divine and human narrative is not always comforting, but often involves suffering.²⁹

The narrative approach to life is mighty and dangerous, thus the title of Anderson and Foley’s book. They concur that “stories are mighty,” for as we tell our stories we realize that our stories do not stand alone: “When we weave together the human and the divine, we are attentive to another story that is not completely our own, a narrative that has the power to transform.”³⁰ It is mighty in that storytelling provides meaning and reveals the intersection between the human and the divine. It is risky in that storytelling opens the door for reinterpretation and transformation.

Two of the most useful storytelling forms are myth and parable, which Anderson and Foley borrow from John Dominic Crossan.³¹ Myth resolves contradiction and holds the promise of reconciliation, while parable complexifies our storytelling in that parables produce contradiction and unsettledness. Myths “comfort us and assure us that everything is going to be all right; parables challenge and dispute the reconciliation that our myths have created.”³² Myth and parable are complementary narrative structures and

²⁸ Anderson and Foley, *Mighty Stories*, 37.

²⁹ Anderson and Foley, *Mighty Stories*, 52.

³⁰ Anderson and Foley, *Mighty Stories*, 7.

³¹ Anderson and Foley, *Mighty Stories*, 13.

³² Anderson and Foley, *Mighty Stories*, 15.

we need both of them. Myths provide meaning and give us a sense of possibility. Parables do not allow for secret keeping as they challenge the myth and promote reconciliation. Human experience does not always unfold according to our myths, but storytelling can help weave the human and divine narrative strands together into meaning and transformation.

Anderson and Foley would argue that conventional public worship tends to primarily and exclusively attend to the divine story, while present pastoral care mostly attends to our own stories.³³ However, for stories to be mighty and dangerous, we need to somehow keep both narratives (divine and human) front and center and explore the connection between the two. Sacred storytelling within the ministry of spiritual direction does exactly this. As McFague says, “trying to live in God’s reality in no way detracts from my reality; in fact, it enhances and fulfills it.”³⁴ Therefore, our task is to hold on to both narrative strands as we weave them together.

For the research project, participants are asked to tell their own stories of knowing and experiencing God within the practice of mothering, which facilitates intersections between the two narratives. Essentially, their storytelling leads to greater awareness of God and self. For example, the idea that God is with us is a myth, meaning that this is one of our key guiding beliefs about God. However, our ordinary experience does not always clearly evidence that belief and reality. Our ordinary experience is a parable, in that it sometimes contradicts what we hold to be true. God does not always seem present or active in our lives. Storytelling, however, allows the participants to tell their stories and know and experience the presence of God in a new way as they make

³³ Anderson and Foley, *Mighty Stories*, 46.

³⁴ Lott, ed., *Sallie McFague*, xxiv.

connections between their own stories and the divine story. It is through storytelling that they realize that God is present and has been present. According to Ruffing, “transformative experiences, which alter our vision of reality, require a narrative that can integrate past and future with these new experiences.”³⁵ However, it requires attentiveness to both the biblical narrative and our own human experience.³⁶

Knowing through Narrative

Not only is narrative a way to understand theology and our personal lives, but it is also the way in which we know. Narrative as a way of knowing is appreciated across a range of fields—practical theology, philosophy, education, spiritual direction, and pastoral care.

Elaine Graham and “Theology by Heart”

In Graham, Walton, and Ward’s classic book *Theological Reflection: Methods*, six out of the seven methods proposed all begin with experience as the starting point for theological reflection, whether that is personal writing, stories, corporate reflection, public life, praxis, or local culture. The self and one’s lived experience is of primary importance and given centre stage. Specifically, in the “Theology by Heart” method of theological reflection, heart-felt inner experience is expressed in some form of text, such as journal-writing, personal letters, spiritual autobiography, prayers, and so on. These are considered ‘living human documents’ in that they are “authentic accounts of lived experience presented in a form that can be read and analysed.”³⁷ Life as text, which is a

³⁵ Ruffing, *To Tell the Sacred Tale*, 72.

³⁶ Anderson and Foley, *Mighty Stories*, 46.

³⁷ Graham, et. al., *Theological Reflections: Methods*, 18.

distinctive feature of this particular theological reflection method, is to be interpreted, resulting in greater self-awareness and deeper theological understanding.³⁸ “Theology by Heart” is dialogical in nature as the self is in conversation with others and with God. Graham notes that this theological reflection method is “highly useful in the nurturing of a deep sense of Christian identity within the individual.”³⁹ Practical theologian Riet Bons-Storm advocates for this method particularly for women because women have “frequently not had access to public arenas of expression” and/or have been “silenced by their experience of living as non-dominant people” in a culture where they are unable to have their stories heard.⁴⁰ In this way, “Theology by Heart” is an ideal theological reflection method for women’s sacred storytelling.

Esther Lightcap Meek and Covenant Epistemology

Meek is a covenant epistemology philosopher who describes knowing as a covenantal relationship between the knower and the not-yet-known.⁴¹ She disregards knowledge as information and knowing as dualistic; instead, she advocates for a fully integrated way of knowing that is essentially relationship.⁴² Using Michael Polanyi’s subsidiary-focal integration theory, which makes the claim that “every act of knowing consists of the knower’s active integration of a variety of particulars into a comprehensive whole,” knowing includes awareness of the whole and awareness of the particulars.⁴³ Meek uses

³⁸ Graham, et. al., *Theological Reflections: Methods*, 21.

³⁹ Graham, et. al., *Theological Reflections: Methods*, 20.

⁴⁰ Graham, et. al., *Theological Reflections: Methods*, 41–42.

⁴¹ Meek, *Little Manual for Knowing*, 5.

⁴² Meek, *Little Manual for Knowing*, 4.

⁴³ Meek, *Contact with Reality*, 31.

the example of playing the piano or learning to ride a bike as concrete examples of knowing that demonstrate the subsidiary-focal integration theory.

According to Meek, we know through relationship as we covenant ourselves to something/someone we do not yet fully know. The metaphors of *pilgrimage* and *gift* are used to convey the connection and transformation involved in the act of knowing. Knowing is viewed as an adventure as we make our way and uncover new clues, thus the pilgrimage analogy. The gift of knowing is that often it comes as a “surprising encounter, equal parts knowing and being known.”⁴⁴ Meek describes our “aha” moments as making contact with reality, evidenced by the accompanying hope and possibilities.⁴⁵ She beautifully describes knowing as a sense of grace: “The breakthrough insight is so lavish, profound, and superior that we easily see we could not have forced it, reasoned to it, or reached it on our own without gracious help from beyond us. Reality itself has met us and gifted itself to us.”⁴⁶ In a sense, according to Meek, as we make contact with reality, reality reaches out to make contact with us.

In regards to spiritual autobiographical writing, Meek’s covenant epistemology means being aware of the particulars of one’s life and simultaneously being aware of God. It is noticing and paying attention to those revelation clues in our stories so that we may know ourselves and the story of God. Similar to Anderson and Foley’s warning that this may be a disruptive experience, Meek also notes that it may not be what we expect, as she says “it is right to ask the questions. But expect to find that you are the one who needs to answer someone else’s questions—someone who has the right and power and

⁴⁴ Meek, *Little Manual for Knowing*, 8.

⁴⁵ Meek, *Little Manual for Knowing*, 63.

⁴⁶ Meek, *Little Manual for Knowing*, 65.

reality to be answered. Expect that in seeking to know God, you are no longer the one in pursuit. You are the pursued.”⁴⁷ Knowing unfolds over time and requires intention and patience, which urges us toward honest and integrative storytelling.

Charlotte Mason and Learning Theory

Learning theorist Mason is a British educational philosopher from the late 19th century to early twentieth century. I chose to home educate our five children (and other children) for twenty years according to the Mason philosophy of education and can testify to the power of narration as a learning method. A distinctive of Mason’s approach to learning is her evaluation method known as narration, often considered the foundation stone of learning.

Narration can be described as the innate, but demanding, art of retelling.

Narration as an educational evaluation tool is inherently generous due to its open-ended and trusting nature. The child (a born person) is trusted to do her own digesting of learning and, therefore, “right answer” or the expression of truth is individually characterized by many factors, such as the child’s personality, learning journey, and so on. For instance, in an architecture lesson, the description of Magdalen College in Oxford can be expressed in multiple accurate ways. Or an explanation of who Emily Dickinson is can be given without adhering to a single correct answer. According to the Mason philosophy, the child is viewed as a person “capable of attention, accountability, insight, and expectation.”⁴⁸ The child is respected as a unique and particular person whom the Holy Spirit is nurturing and growing, so consequently her particular learning

⁴⁷ Meek, *Longing to Know*, 196.

⁴⁸ Cooper, *When Children Love to Learn*, 130.

will reflect that and will be evident in her narrations. Mason argues that narration is an “amazing gift” which children are born with and yet we often allow it to “lie fallow in their education.”⁴⁹ The accumulation of knowledge is not the focus, but rather learning as transformation.

Narration facilitates synthetic thinking, which encourages students to think broadly and deeply. It allows students to form relationships with events, people, places, and ideas. The value of narration depends upon “what has gone on before, upon the amount of attention, and the quality of assimilation and reflection.”⁵⁰ While narration comes naturally to children, it is not a simple or shallow process. The student plays an active role in interpreting the text through the lens of her own experience and then articulating that knowledge in her own voice. The integration and connection that is done through the process of narration requires a sense of attentiveness to the many existing relationships within a child’s life. It is a challenging task to remain attentive, to prioritize and sort information, to connect with previous learning, and to give concise meaning and expression of that knowing. The comprehension and expression required for narration is significant and allows for an abundant and personal sense of knowing. Synthetic thinking is the development of a personal connection and relationship with the information being presented.⁵¹ Not merely parroting a lesson, but “having made that passage one’s own—a part of oneself” is the gift of narration.⁵² “Let us take the goods

⁴⁹ Mason, *Home Education*, 155.

⁵⁰ Cooper, *When Children Love to Learn*, 129.

⁵¹ Glass, *Know and Tell*, 24.

⁵² Millar, “Liberal Education in Secondary Schools 1–12,” 176.

the gods provide” is Mason’s perhaps cheeky insistence on narration as the most natural and favorable evaluation method.⁵³

Mason’s evaluation method of narration demonstrates a generosity towards the child and to the learning itself. There is a wideness and openness to the power of learning which opens up a multitude of possibilities for the student. Mason holds a sustained belief in children as persons, as she describes persons “as fully human with the power to create (Gen 1:26), to relate (1 Cor 12:12), to choose (Rom 3, 5, 6), to love (John 13:34–35), to know (Ps 46:10), to reflect (Gen 2:19) and to access the Supreme Creator, the King and Priest of men and women (Matt 9:14).”⁵⁴ Therefore, children are created with the capability and desire to learn and narrate. As one Mason educator testified, narration enlarged the students’ vocabularies and allowed them to express their ideas more clearly, and the students exercised “a greater amount of intelligence in answering problems and questions based upon the work studied.”⁵⁵ One educator even said when narration is properly dealt with, “it produces a mental transfiguration.”⁵⁶ Elaine Cooper summarizes narration as granting “generous enthusiasms, keen sympathies, wide outlooks, and sound judgement because students are treated as beings of discourse and responsible for knowing.”⁵⁷ As an evaluation method, narration does not constrain or hinder, but frees the child for maximum learning and personal growth.

In terms of this project, my research participants told their stories, or as Mason would say, narrated their mothering experience. The interviews confirmed that

⁵³ Mason, *Home Education*, 155.

⁵⁴ Cooper, *When Children Love to Learn*, 132.

⁵⁵ Cooper, *When Children Love to Learn*, 133.

⁵⁶ Husband, “Some Notes on Narration,” 614.

⁵⁷ Cooper, *When Children Love to Learn*, 138.

storytelling (or narration) comes innately to human beings and feels respectful of one's experience.⁵⁸

Janet Ruffing and Narrative Spiritual Direction

Ruffing chooses a narrative lens to view our human experience and our experience with God within the ministry of spiritual direction. Our experience over time is essentially narrative and it is through narrative that we gain understanding of ourselves and God.⁵⁹ It is through experiences of revelation (as our human narratives intersect with the divine narrative) that we integrate our past and future into our current story and it is spiritual direction that assists in creating a coherent and meaningful narrative of one's life. Imagery, metaphor, and symbol are useful narrative components that aid in meaning-making and sacred storytelling. Narrative spiritual direction is essentially learning how to tell and live one's own story, as it has been shaped by experiences of revelation, within the larger story of Christian faith. Especially for women directees, a director's task is to notice and name experiences and/or themes within their narratives. Women tend to have more multidimensional lives and often attend to several experiences simultaneously, making it more difficult to discern a common theme or plot line.⁶⁰ Once those themes and plots are made explicit, they can be explored and understood in a new way. It is only after "honoring these experiences of mystery and telling them interiorly or in the context of spiritual direction do people grasp with any degree of coherence how

⁵⁸ Most of this section "Charlotte Mason and Learning Theory" has been previously published (July 2023) in a short monograph entitled *The Inherent Generosity within a Charlotte Mason Education and a Practical Theology of Joy*.

⁵⁹ Ruffing, *To Tell the Sacred Tale*, 68, 72.

⁶⁰ Ruffing, *To Tell the Sacred Tale*, 143.

God interacts with them” in their particular context and through their unique personhood.⁶¹

Mary Clark Moschella and Narrative Spiritual Care

As a pastoral theologian, Moschella promotes a narrative approach to spiritual care as a way of knowing themselves and discovering joy in their lives. As someone particularly interested in joy, Moschella argues that “narrative care makes room for joy in that it can help people re-member themselves as vital, valuable, and interrelated beings, feeling their way toward the goodness, beauty, and love of God.”⁶² Oriented towards meaning making with a focus on joy, narrative care encourages people to engage in storytelling in a thick manner, as they understand, interpret, and re-author their stories. For women (and other social groups) whose sense of self has been eroded due to social forces such as patriarchy and racism, narrative spiritual care can help reauthor their own stories in light of the truth of God’s story. Fear, doubt, paralysis, false ideas, and shame can be exposed so a truer, more joyful story can be told. Moschella’s five stages of narrative spiritual care (telling the story, externalizing the problem, mapping the problem, discovering potential outcomes, and retelling the story) require collaboration and patience.⁶³ Interestingly, the final stage of retelling the story is like “giving one’s testimony to a personal conversion experience in some religious traditions.”⁶⁴

Listening to storytelling is a pastoral act and duty. Since the power to speak is not evenly distributed, there is a kind of “emancipatory transformation” that happens

⁶¹ Ruffing, *To Tell the Sacred Tale*, 147.

⁶² Moschella, *Caring for Joy*, 240.

⁶³ Moschella, *Caring for Joy*, 252–53.

⁶⁴ Moschella, *Caring for Joy*, 263.

when those who have been previously silenced or ignored are given the space to speak.⁶⁵ Hearing one's voice and having others listen to one's story is a form of "empowering love."⁶⁶ The role of listening is highly valued, which is a key part of sacred storytelling and my role as researcher for this project. Listening is "indeed a great service, a primary duty of love. It brings honor and recognition to the speaker. Listening gives another the chance to experience his or her inner knowing. Listening can be a means of grace, as it brings forth stories through which people make sense of their lives and become aware of a larger reality."⁶⁷ Therefore, listening necessarily accompanies narration as a way of knowing, particularly as a part of pastoral care.

The Biblical Narrative as the Authoritative Story of Everything

As theologian and pastor Eugene Peterson says, "Reality is story-shaped. The world is story-shaped. Our lives are story-shaped."⁶⁸ It is no surprise that Peterson also recognizes the Holy Scriptures as story-shaped.⁶⁹ The theological framework for this research project lies in the understanding of Scripture as being characterized with a narrative arc, with particular focus on the Incarnation as a key event in terms of everyday spirituality and sacred storytelling.

Narrative: The Only and Best Approach?

⁶⁵ Moschella, "The Transformative Power of Listening" blog, August 18, 2023.

⁶⁶ Moschella, "The Transformative Power of Listening" blog, August 18, 2023.

⁶⁷ Moschella, "The Transformative Power of Listening" blog, August 18, 2023.

⁶⁸ Peterson, *Eat This Book*, 62.

⁶⁹ Peterson describes the Bible as "basically and overall, a narrative, an immense, sprawling, capacious narrative." Peterson sees story as God's primary means of communication, the most accessible form of speech, and a non-coercive invitation. It is interesting to note that Peterson recognizes the authority of God's Story, which requires submission and obedience, but first it requires listening. It is through listening to God's story and to our own story that we begin to make sense of reality. ("Living into God's Story, [n.d.]).

Since the 1960's and what has been called the narrative turn, narrative has become an increasingly popular and powerful way of understanding psychology, history, social sciences, politics, and theology. Although story has been with us since the beginning of time helping us make sense of ourselves and the world around us, it was proponents like Bruner and philosopher Paul Ricoeur who pushed narrative forward for a number of disciplines, including practical theology. The two key ideas that have developed the narrative approach for practical theology, according to Ganzevoort, are that the way we live and understand our lives is narrative and that our identity and significant events in our life can be interpreted as text.⁷⁰

Following her exploration of narrative theology, Downey concludes that narrative theology is a powerful and helpful perspective but not the only approach. She echoes Paul S. Fiddes' conclusion that "narrative or metaphorical theology sets out to make theology less theoretical and more imaginative. It also aims to be more biblical, elaborating, enlarging, interpreting and connecting together the image and stories contained in Scripture for the life and practice of the Christian community."⁷¹ She would argue that narrative theology is best appreciated as it engages with other theological approaches since no approach is complete on its own.

Since I have chosen a narrative approach to this research project, there is no doubt that I consider narrative to be a favored perspective. In particular, I appreciate that the narrative approach values the "individual biography and religious construction" and helps us remain grounded in practice and human reality, avoiding "theoretical

⁷⁰ Ganzevoort, "Narrative Approaches," 215.

⁷¹ Fiddes, "Concept, Image and Story in Systematic Theology," 7.

alienation.”⁷² However, it is not the only approach. Peter Brooks cautions against a blind and un-analyzed approach to narrative. He sees a sort of “narrative takeover of reality” in the early twenty first century that worries him.⁷³ Referring to Annette Simmons, leadership coach and author of *Whoever Tells the Best Story Wins*, he questions her claim that “every problem in the world can be addressed—solved, made bearable, even eliminated—with better storytelling.”⁷⁴ I acknowledge that while narrative expression is a good and powerful way of understanding and communication, it is not the only one and at times, logical argument and other forms of expression also have their place. Stories are not inherently good or true, so a critical ear is necessary. Brooks would argue that “story is powerful, and for that reason it demands a powerful critical response. We need to dismantle and contest its claims to totalistic explanatory force.”⁷⁵ Just like any other approach, narrative can be dishonest and abusive. Therefore, a narrative approach is simply that—a way to view reality. In regard to sacred storytelling and making sense of God’s presence and interaction in our own lives, it is a helpful and worthy approach.

N. T. Wright and the Biblical Narrative as a Drama

N. T. Wright was one of the key proponents to view the Scriptures as story. He first addresses the question as to how a narrative text can be authoritative in his article “How Can the Bible Be Authoritative?” The meaning of authority and how the authority of the Bible is exercised are the two main themes. Recognizing that the authority of the Bible originates in the Triune God, authority is not “the power to control people, and crush

⁷² Ganzevoort, “Narrative Approaches,” 222.

⁷³ Brooks, *Seduced by Story*, 4.

⁷⁴ Brooks, *Seduced by Story*, 7.

⁷⁵ Brooks, *Seduced by Story*, 120.

them, and keep them in little boxes”; but rather God’s authority vested in Scripture is designed to “liberate human beings, to judge and condemn evil and sin in the world in order to set people free to be fully human.”⁷⁶ Then, to answer the second question, God exercises that authority “through human agents anointed and equipped by the Holy Spirit.”⁷⁷ Therefore, the biblical story is an authoritative narrative that involves people because God desires more than obedience. God wants to involve us, or as Wright says, “to catch human beings up in the work that he is doing.”⁷⁸ It is God’s desire to be present with us that explains why God has given us so much story:

Story authority, as Jesus knew only too well, is the authority that really works. Throw a rule book at people’s head, or offer them a list of doctrines, and they can duck or avoid it, or simply disagree and go away. Tell them a story, though, and you invite them to come into a different world; you invite them to share a world-view or better still a “God-view”.⁷⁹

According to Wright, we exercise the authority of the biblical narrative as we tell our own stories of interaction with God.

Then, in 1992, in chapter 5 of *The New Testament and the People of God*, Wright is the first to argue that the biblical story can be viewed as a five-act play.⁸⁰ Others, of course, had previously recognized the narrative arc of Scripture. In 1971, Northrup Frye, a noted professor from the University of Toronto, applied literary theory to biblical study and argued that the Bible is “much closer to being a work of literature than it is to being a work of history or doctrine.”⁸¹ Frye saw the Bible as “an epic, with God as the hero. It is a romance, a quest for lost society that moves from Genesis to Revelation.”⁸²

⁷⁶ Wright, “How Can the Bible be Authoritative?” 17.

⁷⁷ Wright, “How Can the Bible be Authoritative?” 17.

⁷⁸ Wright, “How Can the Bible be Authoritative?” 23.

⁷⁹ Wright, “How Can the Bible be Authoritative?” 23.

⁸⁰ Wright, *New Testament and the People of God*, 142.

⁸¹ Frye, *The Critical Path*, 116.

⁸² Stafford, “The Bible as Visionary Power,” 1982.

In 1989, Wright initiated the idea of Scripture as a drama divided into five specific acts, being creation, the fall, Israel, Jesus, and the church.⁸³

In regards to understanding Scripture as narrative, Wright proposes a form of critical realism, rather than positivism which claims that we have definite knowledge about some things. Wright's critical realism approach involves a process of knowing that "acknowledges the reality of the thing known, as something other than the knower (hence 'realism'), while also fully acknowledging that the only access we have to this reality lies along the spiraling path of appropriate dialogue or conversation between the knower and the thing known (hence 'critical')." ⁸⁴ In other words, there is a sense of independent realities, but there is also a relationship between knowledge and the knower. We as story-telling humans live in a story-laden world, which we initially observe, then challenge by critical reflection, and then, find new ways of speaking truthfully about the world through new stories.⁸⁵ The wonderful thing about this approach is that it acknowledges objective truth (Scripture) but allows for relationship between the knower and reality, which represents the subjectiveness of knowing (telling our own stories). In response to Brook's caution regarding narrative, Wright's critical realism approach is based on the authority of Scripture, through which our own personal stories are understood. There is an independent truth (Scripture) which guides our own personal meaning-making, as the best narrative theology does not separate truth from meaning.⁸⁶

⁸³ Wright, "How Can the Bible be Authoritative?" 19.

⁸⁴ Wright, *New Testament and the People of God*, 35.

⁸⁵ Wright, *New Testament and the People of God*, 44.

⁸⁶ Downey, "A Perspective on Narrative Theology," 307.

Referring back to Wright's idea of Scripture as a five-act drama, Richard Middleton and Brian Walsh expanded the biblical narrative to add another act to this drama in *Truth is Stranger than It Used to Be*, which they named the final consummation.⁸⁷ Then Craig Bartholomew and Michael Goheen wrote *The Drama of Scripture*—in which they fully tell the biblical story in 6 acts—with the return of the King, or redemption completed, as the final act. The story of Scripture told through these six acts (creation, sin, Israel, Jesus, the church, and the complete cosmic redemption when Jesus returns) provides us with the true story of the whole world.⁸⁸ Wright says that Christianity offers public truth, which is a story of the whole world.⁸⁹

A God Who Comes Close

Since the basis for sacred storytelling relies on the assumption that God is present in our everyday lives, we look to the biblical narrative for such theological confirmation. God's desire to be with and to interact with human beings is evident throughout the biblical narrative, but most clearly shown through the first act of creation (Gen 1–3), the fourth act of Jesus (as told through Matt, Mark, Luke, John), and the beginning of the fifth act of the church which is Pentecost (Acts 2). The opening act of creation famously proclaims that “in the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth” (Gen 1:1). The following chapters in the Book of Genesis tell the story of a Divine Being speaking us

⁸⁷ More specifically, Middleton and Walsh separate Wright's last act into two distinct acts, being the age of the church and the final consummation, believing that there needs to be a distinction made between the present and the future. Middleton and Walsh, *Truth is Stranger Than It Used to Be*, 182.

⁸⁸ Bartholomew and Goheen, *Drama of Scripture*, 22.

⁸⁹ Wright, *New Testament and the People of God*, 42.

and our world into existence. What is this Divine Being's relationship to the world? To us? Is this God present or far away? How does this God feel about us?

Miroslav Volf and Ryan McAnnally-Linz argue that the “story of everything is the story of God coming to dwell in and with human beings and the world.”⁹⁰ Not only do we find our home in God, as Augustine argued, but God makes God's home with us, here on Earth.⁹¹ Not only does God loves the world, and insists that we are to love this world as well: “But to love God is to love the world that God loves—and to love it. . . with the love with which God loves it and which God is. If this idea appears startlingly ‘worldly,’ that’s because the holy and transcendent God is surprisingly worldly—desiring to make a home and be at home in the beloved creation.”⁹² The story of everything always starts with God. John 1:1 states that God existed before creation and is the starting point for all reality and all stories: “God is the author of the story of everything” as it was God's voice that spoke the world into being.⁹³ We are not “mere fireflies in cosmic darkness—isolated selves living out dreams and fears as we struggle for survival, pleasure, and supremacy in the short course of our lives.”⁹⁴ Instead, we are part of the created world, which is the home of God. Although Volf and McAnnally-Linz's main purpose of their book is more focused on the home-making of God and how that sense of home can be a propelling metaphor for Christian living, what is important for the sake of this project is that they remind us that the story of everything revolves around a God who deeply loves this world and the people who inhabit it. Therefore, in

⁹⁰ Volf and McAnnally-Linz, *Home of God*, 13

⁹¹ Augustine, *Confessions*, 3.

⁹² Volf and McAnnally-Linz, *Home of God*, 13.

⁹³ Volf and McAnnally-Linz, *Home of God*, 19.

⁹⁴ Volf and McAnnally-Linz, *Home of God*, 22.

order to make sense of our own lives, we need to remember that this world is our home, but it is also God's home. Our God is a God who comes close. This is the divine narrative which serves as the framework for our own stories.

In the biblical narrative, Creation reveals a generous and abundant God who lovingly creates humanity in God's own image and sustains us with God's own breath. It is the story of God and the story of us. Richard Rohr sometimes refers to Creation as the "first incarnation."⁹⁵ The more familiar and explicit Incarnation, which comes in the form of a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths lying in a manger in the town of Bethlehem, is a visible introduction to the God who makes intimate and participatory relationship possible between humanity and divinity.

The Narrative of the Incarnation as the Core Theological Construct

Dualism

Even though we live in the postmodern age and, according to Jens Zimmerman, we have "danced on the grave of scientific and philosophical rationalism," dualism continues to persist, particularly in the Evangelical tradition.⁹⁶ Dualism is a theory or philosophy that divides reality into two independent, often opposing, principles. Though the postmodern mind has started to move away from this way of operating, it remains as it tries to divide a complex reality into opposing sides, like the invisible and visible, the divine and the human, the sacred and the secular, and finally, faith and imagination versus reason.

Tragically, dualism usually favours one over the other. The danger of dualism is that it is an oversimplified and reductionist approach to life. Zimmerman advocates for

⁹⁵ Rohr, "The First Incarnation," [n.d.].

⁹⁶ Zimmerman, *Incarnational Humanism*, 12.

an incarnational humanism, based on the idea that “God had become human and thus had truly taken creation and humanity into the divine life.”⁹⁷ Therefore, this dissertation proposes that even though we have made these false divides with the invisible, the divine, the sacred, and imagination on one hand and the visible, the human, the secular, and reason on the other hand, the Incarnate Christ connects all these things. When God became human, things were mended and weaved together. If we are able to dwell in this world with an incarnational understanding of how everything fits together, then we can start to see the presence of God more clearly in our own lives and in the world around us, which then leads to sacred storytelling. First, the Incarnation connects the invisible and the visible.

The Great Connection

The Invisible and Visible

Malcolm Guite, a British poet, priest, and professor, says that it is the Incarnate Christ “who brings all that is invisible and intuited into the realm of the visible and the known.”⁹⁸ In this coming to earth, the Incarnate Christ breaks the barrier between the invisible and visible. In the biblical narrative, Moses wanted to see God’s face, but God said that he would surely die if that happened. So instead, God put Moses in a cleft of a rock and covered him with his hand, and all Moses managed was a small glimpse of his back (Exod 33:18–20). Again, in the biblical narrative, King David prayed that God’s face would shine down upon the people, confident that the face of God would save them (Ps 80:19). Centuries later, as recorded in Luke 1:26–38, we find the invisible God

⁹⁷ Zimmerman, *Incarnational Humanism*, 13.

⁹⁸ Guite, *Lifting the Veil*, 18.

tucked away in Mary’s blooming belly. A few short months later, Mary and Joseph are face to face with the Almighty God as flesh and blood, gazing into his eyes as they rocked him and fed him. What was invisible is now made visible.

It is the Incarnate Christ who reveals to us more fully who God is and what God is like. Colossians 1:15 says the Son is the image of the invisible God. If we want to know what God is like, we look at Jesus. The Son, the *Logos*, has been present since creation, but the Incarnation tears back the veil and we see God face to face.⁹⁹ A. W. Tozer said that “what comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us” because we “tend by a secret law of the soul to move toward our mental image of God.”¹⁰⁰ So it matters—who is this God who arrives in Bethlehem? St. Athanasius, one of our early church fathers from the 4th century, says that Christ did this “out of sheer love for us.”¹⁰¹ He says this was the only reason—the love and goodness of God, with the salvation of all.¹⁰² The Incarnation is, then, an outrageous display of a Divine Being who deeply loves humanity.¹⁰³

Macolm Guite and Steve Bell perform this thoughtful account of the Incarnation called “Descent.”¹⁰⁴ Referring to the other gods, they say that they sought lofty and proud positions way up high and yet the Incarnate Christ comes down. The other gods demanded fear, but the Incarnate Christ gives love. The perfection of these other gods was frozen in chiseled marble, yet our God’s blood is warm. When the other gods demanded blood and sacrifice, our God stretches out on a cross and dies instead. The

⁹⁹ Stackhouse, “Jesus Christ,” 146–58.

¹⁰⁰ Tozer, *Knowledge of the Holy*, 1.

¹⁰¹ St. Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, 9.

¹⁰² St. Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, 2.

¹⁰³ Schleiermacher, *Christmas Eve Celebration*, xviii.

¹⁰⁴ Guite, *Singing Bowl*, 93.

other gods scorned human flesh and yet the Incarnate Christ takes on human flesh and humbly and patiently grows inside a young woman's uterus and enters the world as a human baby.¹⁰⁵ This is the God we know through the Incarnation.

Not only are we reintroduced to God in an up-close and visible way, but we are invited into relationship. The God we see in the manger is a personal God who desires relationship with us. This is one of the most remarkable things about God. Titus 3:4, 5 says that “when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us.” The Incarnation was an act of love, for the purposes of love. Not only is God One who loves but God desires connection with humanity. The Trinity is our attempt to understand God “as God is revealed variously as Father, Son and Holy Spirit: God himself is personal and works in personal relations.”¹⁰⁶ So our God is not a metaphysical reality who has no interest in humanity or relationship. The Incarnate Christ reveals to us a God who is very much interested in having relationship with the created physical world. Peterson says that Jesus “is the central and defining figure in the spiritual life. His life, is, precisely, revelation. He brings out into the open what we could never have figured out for ourselves, never guessed in a million years. He is God among us: God speaking, acting, healing, helping.”¹⁰⁷ It is the physical fully human, fully God Jesus that prevents us from becoming so heady and philosophical about invisible ideas and realities that we forget that the Christian faith is practical in nature and very much concerned with human existence. Jesus confirms to us that our God thinks the human experience is of utmost significance. It is his life of 33 years—the birth, the death, the resurrection—that reveals

¹⁰⁵ Guite, *Singing Bowl*, 93.

¹⁰⁶ Peterson, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places*, 7.

¹⁰⁷ Peterson, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places*, 33.

to us the mystery of the invisible God. We cannot really talk about Christmas without talking about Easter. As Martin Luther said, “The manger and the cross are never far apart.”¹⁰⁸ So it is the whole life of the Incarnate Christ, his birth and his death, that bridges the gap between the invisible and the visible. This leads to our second connection between divinity and humanity.

Divinity and Humanity

Not only do we see the invisible God more clearly in the Incarnation, but in some mysterious way, divinity and humanity are intertwined. According to the biblical narrative, the human person is made in the image of God in the first chapter of Genesis. When Jesus is born in the manger in Bethlehem, in a way, God “copies humans.”¹⁰⁹ If you look one way, Jesus is the perfect picture of God. If you look the other way, Jesus is the perfect picture of humanity.¹¹⁰ So the human person not only looks like God (as in, being made in the image of God), but the Incarnation makes “human nature capable of bearing union with the divine.”¹¹¹ Somehow we not only have the chance to see God face to face, but we are invited into this union or intimate relationship with God. Life with God is a key part of Christian spirituality, based on Jesus’ statement “I am the vine and you are the branches. Remain in me as I also remain in you” (John 15:4, 5). The Incarnation bridges the distance between humanity and divinity; thus, making the possibility to intimately connect with the Divine a new reality.

¹⁰⁸ Luther, *Martin Luther’s Christmas Book*, 5.

¹⁰⁹ Crisp, *Word Made Flesh*, 62.

¹¹⁰ Farley, *Gathering Those Driven Away*, 132.

¹¹¹ Crisp, *Word Made Flesh*, 63.

In this human-divine relationship, divinity and humanity are connected but remain different. Zimmerman says that “Christ the transcendent inhabits the immanent without collapsing their differences.”¹¹² Thomas Torrance says that this is an “utterly staggering fact of God in which he gives himself to us and adopts us into the communion of his divine life and love through Jesus Christ and in his One Spirit, yet in such a way that we are not made divine but are preserved in our humanity.”¹¹³ So divinity and humanity are connected but remain different.

There is a mutual desire for this connection. Part of being human is this stubborn desire for the transcendent. Ecclesiastes 3:10 says that God has put eternity in our hearts, so there is something in us that is aware of something beyond our physical existence here on earth. We are aware of and desire something more, something other-worldly, something divine. Even though our age is certainly secular, Charles Taylor “names and identifies what some of our best novelists, poets and artists attest to: that our age is haunted.”¹¹⁴ James K. A. Smith echoes Taylor and says that we are tempted by “intimations of transcendence.”¹¹⁵ We know there is more to this world and the Incarnation confirms that as we are reaching out for God, God is already reaching towards us.

As we make this discovery of what was once invisible, we are making contact with Reality. Meek describes knowing God as being “intoxicated with Reality.”¹¹⁶ One of Meek’s students reflected on knowing God as more than an accumulation of

¹¹² Zimmerman, *Incarnational Humanism*, 19.

¹¹³ Torrance, *Mediation of Christ*, 64.

¹¹⁴ Smith, *How (Not) to be Secular*, 3.

¹¹⁵ Smith, *How (Not) to be Secular*, 4.

¹¹⁶ Meek, “Knowing”.

knowledge, saying: “I was led to believe that being a good Christian was all about defending the propositions of your faith rationally. It took the magic out of it. Now you tell me about knowing as unlocking the door, and it restores the magic.”¹¹⁷ The Christian faith is more than a creed of beliefs or a social ethic. It is essentially about Christ unlocking the door between humanity and divinity, as we enter into relationship with God.

However, it goes beyond connection. There is an invitation from the Divine for participation in life together.¹¹⁸ Hans Boersma calls this weaving together of the divine and the human as “heavenly participation.”¹¹⁹ Boersma boldly pushes the relationship between God and the created world beyond one of creation, and even covenant, insisting on a “sacramental link” between God and the world.¹²⁰ Taking a Christian Platonistic view, he argues for a sacramental ontology, implying real presence and participation between the created world and God.¹²¹ “Reality truly is mysterious” and it is no surprise that we feel a tugging towards this participation with God.¹²² C. S. Lewis describes beauty as something that we see and appreciate but that we want more: “We want something else which can hardly be put into words—to be united with the beauty we see, to pass into it, to receive it into ourselves, to bathe in it, to become part of it.”¹²³

¹¹⁷ Meek, *Longing to Know*, 145.

¹¹⁸ Zimmerman, *Incarnational Humanism*, 19.

¹¹⁹ Boersma, *Heavenly Participation*, 24.

¹²⁰ Boersma, *Heavenly Participation*, 24.

¹²¹ Christian Platonism is the belief that “in and through Christ, created (sensible) beings participate in God’s uncreated (spiritual) Being” and that it is the “eternal world of forms that gives meaning and significance to created things. Boersma “All One in Christ: Why Christian Platonism is Key to the Great Tradition.”

¹²² Boersma, *Heavenly Participation*, 22.

¹²³ Lewis, *Weight of Glory*, 42.

There is mutual desire for more than a nominal, even covenantal relationship between humanity and divinity, for it is a participatory relationship that is desired.

God is an active God, not a passive deity. The activity (sometimes referred to as a dance) within the Trinity is called *perichoresis*. *Perichoresis*, sometimes known as *circumincession*, is a theological term “affirming that the divine essence is shared by each of the three persons of the Trinity in a manner that avoids blurring the distinctions among them. By extension, this idea suggests that any essential characteristic that belongs to one of the three is shared by the others.”¹²⁴ Essentially, *perichoresis* describes the relationship and activity among the Trinity, which we are invited into.

The spiritual life of a Christian is all about sharing in the nature of God and participating in the work of God. As Peterson says, God is not a non-participant in what God does. God does not delegate or manage from a distance. God does not separate himself from humanity by “ranks of angel-secretaries through whom we have to arrange an audience.”¹²⁵ Boersma warns that once modernity abandoned a “participatory or sacramental view of reality, the created order became unmoored from its origin in God and the material cosmos began its precarious drift on the flux of nihilistic waves.”¹²⁶ In other words, when we forget that we are connected to God, life becomes meaningless. It loses its sense of mystery.¹²⁷

Therefore, as we look for signs of the Divine, we do so with confidence because the Incarnate Christ has connected the visible and invisible (our world is now multi-dimensional and there is more than meets the eye) and our sixth sense tells us that this

¹²⁴ Grenz, et. al., *Theological Terms*, 26.

¹²⁵ Peterson, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places*, 305.

¹²⁶ Boersma, *Heavenly Participation*, 2.

¹²⁷ Smith, *How (Not) to be Secular*, 51.

world is tinged with divine glory. Then, we can accept this intimate invitation of sacramental participation with God. This is at the core of who God is—God’s desire to be in a participatory relationship with us—and it is at the core of who we are—that we desire to know and be known by God. Then the question is: How do we participate with God? What does it look like for humanity to participate with divinity?

This leads us to our next great connection between the sacred and the secular. Do we participate best with God by joining a Bible study? Or by reading a bedtime story to a toddler? Do we participate with God as we walk and pray contemplatively alone in the woods? Or by coaching our son’s volleyball team? Or rocking an infant to sleep? The answer is yes and yes and yes. All those things. God’s presence and activity are not limited to only part of the human experience.

The Sacred and the Secular

We tend to think of sacred things separate from secular things, however, the Incarnation weaves these two together. Elizabeth Dreyer says that “an incarnational theology overturns two track schemas in which one’s religious existence and the daily round of living run forever in parallel, never-to-meet lines.”¹²⁸ This means that we do not escape from the world, but in a way, we dive deeper into the human experience. Thanks to the Incarnation, now “all of matter, all of the cosmos has been radically and unalterably made holy by the entrance of God into history.”¹²⁹ To be in a participatory sacramental relationship with God means that we are fully awake and alive to the human experience. The Incarnation shows a deep love and respect for the human experience. It is not to be

¹²⁸ Dreyer, *Earth Crammed with Heaven*, 22.

¹²⁹ Dreyer, *Earth Crammed with Heaven*, 63.

scorned or dismissed. Indeed, poet Mary Oliver names our human experience rightly—our one “wild and precious life.”¹³⁰

Alexander Schmemmann argues that there should be no divide between the natural and supernatural and he weaves these two together in a sort of sacred tapestry. He says everything is to lead us back to Christ.¹³¹ Everything is to be received from God and offered back to God. Schmemmann reminds us that Christ did not come to replace natural matter with supernatural matter, but Christ restored and redeemed them. The sacraments of the church—bread and wine for the Eucharist, water for baptism—are very natural things that lead us into the presence of God. In fact, “the entire cosmos is meant to serve as a sacrament: a material gift from God in and through which we enter into the joy of his heavenly presence.”¹³²

So there is no choice between the sacred and secular.¹³³ It is a false choice. However, according to the biblical narrative, it is sin and fear that have blinded us to the Divine Reality, which prevent us from seeing clearly. If the sacred and the secular are no longer separate, then every moment, every encounter is a possible theophany. Reading *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* to your children at bedtime, breastfeeding, a day of scrubbing the floor and laundry, Renoir’s *Two Young Girls at the Piano* or internet images from the Ukraine or the Middle East these days—these all have the potential to be burning bushes. As part of our Christian spirituality, we are able to see through the visible and connect and participate with the invisible, the Divine Immanuel. The Christian life is with eyes open to this other dimension of the invisible, participation in the divine life of

¹³⁰ Oliver, *New and Selected Poems*, 94.

¹³¹ Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World*, 17.

¹³² Boersma, *Heavenly Participation*, 9.

¹³³ Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World*, 112.

Christ, with the understanding that the entire cosmos is a possible theophany. This requires a rich way of knowing, which leads to the final point—the Incarnate Christ connecting imagination and reason.

Imagination and Reason

Our task is not to bring Christ into the world—for he is already here.¹³⁴ Our task is to notice Immanuel, or “God with us,” in our ordinary lives. Since God is not always obviously present, we have to become “detectives of divinity,” which is Peterson’s somewhat whimsical phrase.¹³⁵ We must learn to recognize glory. We can only do that with a fully integrated way of knowing that includes reason and imagination.

Guite traces the suspicion towards faith back to the Enlightenment, saying that “some philosophers of the Enlightenment thought that image and imagination simply clouded and obscured the pure dry knowledge which they were after.”¹³⁶ However, we know that the created world “cannot be reduced to measurable, manageable dimensions.”¹³⁷ Our poets and artists know this world is more than physical matter. Gerard Manley Hopkins penned the famous line that the world is “charged with the grandeur of God,”¹³⁸ while Elizabeth Barrett Browning testified that the

Earth is crammed with heaven,
and every common bush afire with God:
But only he who sees, takes off his shoes,
the rest sit around it and pluck blackberries.¹³⁹

¹³⁴ Dreyer, *Earth Crammed with Heaven*, 63.

¹³⁵ Peterson, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places*, 108.

¹³⁶ Guite, *Lifting the Veil*, 14.

¹³⁷ Boersma, *Heavenly Participation*, 21.

¹³⁸ Hopkins, “God’s Grandeur,” [n.d.].

¹³⁹ Browning, “From Aurora Leigh,” [n.d.].

There is a sense of mystery to the human life that cannot be known solely through reason. The Christian faith is also performative and embodied, involving both reason and emotion. In response to the “increasingly bleak reductionism which gave us data but no meaning, and an increasingly dislocated and orphaned imaginative and intuitive life crying endlessly for meaning,” a fully integrated, incarnational approach to reality includes a reinvigorated imagination, along with reason.¹⁴⁰ In Lewis’ words, “reason is the natural organ of truth; but imagination is the organ of meaning.”¹⁴¹ If we approach knowing God in an epistemological dualistic way, valuing reason over faith or imagination, then we are only interested in information about God, but that information is only part of knowledge.

In Meek’s covenant epistemology, we know by covenanting ourselves to the not-yet-known, which in the Christian theological vision is God.¹⁴² We bind ourselves to something, Someone, we do not quite know. Knowing involves a leap of faith or a sense of imagination. We need a full-bodied wisdom, one that includes reason and imagination as we make sense of our human narrative and God’s narrative.

Dorothy Bass, a practical theologian, says a biblical imagination helped her see “an ordinary meal as manna, a time of uncertainty as a wilderness journey, and an object of desire as a golden calf.”¹⁴³ She says we need not a knowledge about God, but a knowledge of God. We do not need a map dropped from above but we need “a walking around knowledge”.¹⁴⁴ That sort of knowledge includes both reason and imagination. I

¹⁴⁰ Guite, *Lifting the Veil*, 14.

¹⁴¹ Lewis, *Selected Literary Essays*, 265.

¹⁴² Meek, *Little Manual for Knowing*, 5.

¹⁴³ Bass, “Imagining,” 235.

¹⁴⁴ Bass, “Imagining,” 236.

suggest that it is a *poesis* knowledge we need to nurture. This is a knowing that usually belongs to the artist and integrates imagination with reason. It is the sort of knowing that Jesus encouraged for his listeners as he told stories involving everyday scenarios and material objects to illustrate extraordinary truths and realities. The kingdom of God which he preached constantly could not be intellectually known without the use of imagination. We would not argue that what Jesus said was untrue because it was imaginary. For example, in Luke 15, the story is told of a woman who lost a coin. It is not the factual details of the story that invite our attention, but it is through our imaginations that we are able to fully engage with the deeper truth within the story.

My imagination was stretched as we were driving through Saskatchewan one summer. We stopped in a small town and there on the lawn of a church was a statue of a homeless man begging for change. It was not what I expected. It was not how I pictured Jesus. And then I remembered the gospel narrative of the disciples asking Jesus, “When did we see you hungry? Or thirsty? Or in prison?” (Matt 25:31–40). That statue rekindled my imagination.

French Jesuit spiritual director Jean-Pierre de Caussade, from the 1700s, mourns “how tragic in our day has been the needless separation between reason and devotion.”¹⁴⁵ We need both a “tough mind and a tender heart.”¹⁴⁶ The Incarnation means that our everyday lives are graced with the presence of God. In order to fully understand that, we need reinvigorated imaginations to see the presence of God in our everyday lives and we need a sense of imagination to know how to participate in the divine workings of God. John Calvin described this world as a theatre. For him, every part of

¹⁴⁵ de Caussade, *Sacrament of the Present Moment*, xxii.

¹⁴⁶ de Caussade, *Sacrament of the Present Moment*, xxii.

life had the potential to glorify God.¹⁴⁷ Calvin invites us to imagine the world, our life here on earth as “a platform for God’s glory” or a “dazzling theatre.”¹⁴⁸ John Ames, the main character in Marilyn Robinson’s *Gilead*, refers to Calvin’s idea and wonders about us as actors on a stage and God as the audience. He says “that metaphor has always interested me, because it makes us artists of our behaviour, and the reaction of God to us might be thought of as aesthetic rather than morally judgmental in the ordinary sense.”¹⁴⁹ Knowing how to participate with God, something which is more than simple obedience, requires a more complete way of knowing, beyond only reason.

We need a sense of imagination to see the presence of God in our own lives and then we need a sense of imagination to know how to participate in the activity of the Divine. We are to use our imagination “not to escape the world but to join it.”¹⁵⁰ It is the art of noticing that will allow us to pay attention and remove “the veil between us and the radiant reality of things,” as Guite calls it, or the “film of familiarity,” as Samuel Coleridge names it.¹⁵¹ Madeleine L’Engle in her book about the Incarnation says that “our understanding will not come in ordinary, mathematical proofs or equations, but in flashes of the reality of love, a reality which is often most honestly faced in the world of dream, myth, parable, and questions which have no finite answer.”¹⁵² With imagination and reason, we then learn how to recognize and cooperate with God.

¹⁴⁷ Calvin, *Institutes of Religion*, 1.11.12.

¹⁴⁸ Calvin, *Institutes of Religion*, 1.14.20 and 1.5.8; 2.6.1.

¹⁴⁹ Robinson, *Gilead*, 124.

¹⁵⁰ Iris Murdoch as quoted in Bass, “Imagining,” 274.

¹⁵¹ Guite, *Lifting the Veil*, 12.

¹⁵² L’Engle, *Bright Evening Star*, 170.

The Incarnation and Farewell to Dualism

No longer is reality and the human experience chopped up into these unnecessary and unhelpful categories. Instead, the Incarnate Christ holds all things together. He is the centre of Reality. Col 1:17–20 proclaims that Jesus is the image of the invisible God and that “all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things and in him all things hold together.” The Incarnate Christ connects all things together.

Wendy Farley, who echoes Friedrich Schleiermacher’s words, says that “love can be the root symbol for God because union is the fundamental divine teleology.”¹⁵³ Basically, God is a God who connects and brings things and people together. As “love requires difference but longs for union,” God is most interested in union between God and humanity.¹⁵⁴ It is the Incarnation that grounds us in our human existence and encourages us to be fully alive to the human experience and fully awake to the reality of God.

We believe that God is present in our everyday lives. The invisible God has been made visible through the Incarnate Christ. Not only does this Divine God want to connect with us, but the Divine invites the human into sacramental participation. However, the reality of God is not always obvious so we have to look hard to see the presence of God and to know how to participate with God. And we know where to look—all of life. There is no sacred and secular, for the Incarnate Christ has woven these together. With imagination and reason, we can start to see the presence of God and we

¹⁵³ Farley, *Gathering Those Driven Away*, 132.

¹⁵⁴ Farley, *Gathering Those Driven Away*, 132.

can learn how to participate with God. These revelations then can be articulated as our sacred tales.

Everyday Spirituality

An incarnational approach to understanding reality and making sense of our own stories requires us to pay attention to our ordinary human experience. In *The Sacrament of the Present Moment*, de Caussade wrote that he had an “utter indifference to the spectacular.”¹⁵⁵ He said that, as the people of God, we have “utter freedom from all sacred and secular dichotomies.”¹⁵⁶ In fact, the present moment is pregnant with possibility of connection with the Divine.¹⁵⁷ So we can attend to the quotidian or that “belonging to the everyday, commonplace, ordinary.”¹⁵⁸ Kathleen Norris says that as part of Christian faith, to shortchange these quotidian, everyday gifts of ordinary human existence is to reject God’s incarnation in Jesus Christ.¹⁵⁹ Our everyday experience is the place where God interacts and speaks with us. Practices within everyday spirituality, such as mothering, are therefore places of theological discovery as God reveals Godself amidst the ordinary.

Sacred Storytelling

In *The Remarkable Ordinary*, Frederick Buechner invites us “to stop and look and listen.”¹⁶⁰ He says, “Become more sensitive, more aware, more alive, to our own

¹⁵⁵ de Caussade, *Sacrament of the Present Moment*, xix.

¹⁵⁶ de Caussade, *Sacrament of the Present Moment*, xvii.

¹⁵⁷ de Caussade, *Sacrament of the Present Moment*, 62.

¹⁵⁸ Norris, *Quotidian Mysteries*, preface.

¹⁵⁹ Norris, *Quotidian Mysteries*, 84.

¹⁶⁰ Buechner, *Remarkable Ordinary*, 31.

humanness, to the humanness of each other. Look with Rembrandt's eye, listen with Bach's ear."¹⁶¹ Buechner even says that is what knowing and loving God is—paying attention, being mindful, being open to the possibility that God is with us in ways we may not notice. As part of Christian spirituality, there is a call to pay attention to those experiences of the presence of God or revelations of God. Helen Collins notes in her theological reflection method that that “Christian faith and theology is oriented around the encounter and participation with God's own life and the witnessing to that through the telling of one's story.”¹⁶² It is an incarnational understanding of reality that can awaken us to the presence of God in our ordinary lives.

Sacred tales tell who we are but also who God is. This is always the case, even if it is not explicit, as Walton says that “reflecting upon our own identity inevitably leads us to think about how we have come to ‘know’ God.”¹⁶³ Not only is storytelling a core practice of spiritual formation, but it is also a theological exercise. The role of the practical theologian in terms of sacred storytelling is to “hear and hold these narrative fragments, seeking within them traces of divine presence, deep questions, and life-giving wisdom.”¹⁶⁴ There is interpretation, discernment, and meaning-making involved as sacred stories are told, as spiritual direction is a sort of “grass-roots narrative theology.”¹⁶⁵ It is a spiritual practice that blends practical theology and discernment. Therefore, sacred storytelling assists in understanding and making meaning of our own

¹⁶¹ Buechner, *Remarkable Ordinary*, 29.

¹⁶² Collins, *Reordering Theological Reflection*, 129.

¹⁶³ Walton, *Writing Methods*, xxxii.

¹⁶⁴ Wolfeich, *Mothering*, 155.

¹⁶⁵ Ruffing, “Practices of Spiritual Direction,” 198.

lives as we pay attention to the human narrative and its connection with the divine narrative.

Let me conclude with a story of my own from a few weeks ago. One Friday night, I had tea and date squares with two other ministers' wives in our small town. Conflict and division is part of our local church history. The fact that the Baptist, the United, and the Church of Christ ministers' wives were together in one room, sharing spiritual conversation and laughter, and that a sense of cooperation and one-ness in Christ was present—was unusual, if not a small miracle. Together we wondered what God might be doing. This is my sacred tale.

Transition to Mothering and Everyday Spirituality

Now we will turn to mothering as a spiritual practice and the specific area in which sacred storytelling will be utilized for the research project. In everyday spirituality, according to spiritual directors like Ruffing, our ordinary human experience is a way to know and experience God which includes everyday practices like mothering. Thus, the spirituality of mothering will be investigated, along with a brief history of mothering and women's spiritual autobiographical writing.

CHAPTER 2: MOTHERING AND EVERYDAY SPIRITUALITY

The narrative lens is a favorable and helpful way to make sense of our own lives, understand reality, and to know God. The biblical narrative, particularly the key event of the Incarnation, assures us that God is interested and active in our ordinary lives while our own human experience is tinged with a desire for knowledge of and interaction with the Divine. Since this research project focuses on the specific spiritual practice of mothering, spirituality and mothering will be defined, followed by a brief history of mothering. Then I will look at women and their spiritual experiences, as recorded throughout history as spiritual autobiographical writing, including lay women's spiritual life writing. This will all be framed within an understanding of God and human experience, answering the questions "Is God close or faraway?," followed by "God is here but where?" Finally, I will situate the research project within the larger conversation of everyday spirituality, women's experience, and women's spiritual autobiographical writing. References will be made to the research interviews and the participants will be identified as P1, P2, and so on. A complete explanation of the research project will be done in Chapter 3.

The Spirituality of Mothering

Definition of Spirituality

Adam McClendon names three streams of spirituality: general, Christian, and biblical.¹ General spirituality is defined as “the life one lives in light of their understanding of and experience with god,” or, however, they name transcendence.² For instance, Elizabeth J. Andrew, author of *Writing the Sacred Journey*, defines spirituality as “the dimension of our being that relates to the inexplicable.”³ Christian spirituality, according to McClendon, is the life “brought under and in submission to the Holy Spirit.”⁴ Fearful that Christian spirituality only relies on the guidance of the Holy Spirit but that one’s experience and understanding may not be grounded in the context of Scripture, McClendon then insists on a third category of spirituality named biblical spirituality. Biblical spirituality involves “an understanding of and experience with God under the direction of and in submission to the Holy Spirit as rooted in the normative standard of God’s Word.”⁵ Similarly, with increased focus on Christ and one’s life with Christ, Wolfteich defines Christian spirituality as the “human desire for God, an orientation of one’s life toward the sacred, intimacy with Christ, life in the Spirit, and discipleship that bears fruit.”⁶ For the purposes of this research project, I will blend these two definitions together and define spirituality as an understanding of and experience with God, intimacy with Christ, in collaboration with and in submission to the Holy Spirit, as understood through the biblical narrative. Although this is a somewhat cumbersome

¹ McClendon, “Defining the Role of the Bible in Spirituality,” 207.

² McClendon, “Defining the Role of the Bible in Spirituality,” 214.

³ Andrew, *Writing the Sacred Journey*, 71.

⁴ McClendon, “Defining the Role of the Bible in Spirituality,” 216.

⁵ McClendon, “Defining the Role of the Bible in Spirituality,” 221.

⁶ Wolfteich, *Navigating New Terrain*, 19.

definition, I appreciate spirituality being more than a mysterious or transcendent experience; but that spirituality is an experience of God through the power of the Spirit, somehow shaped and nurtured by the biblical narrative which tells the story of the Incarnate Christ.

During the project, P5 defines spirituality as “God meeting us wherever.” She says “if spirituality is a connection with something other than ourselves then my connection to God is undeniably spiritual and by deduction then my connection through God to my children could be considered a spiritual experience.” Practically speaking, P5 understands spirituality as an expression and practice of her Christian faith, which in this situation is mothering. This aligns with Alister E. McGrath’s definition of Christian spirituality as “living out of the encounter with Jesus Christ.”⁷

Definition of Mothering

It is acknowledged that women may mother children in several ways (birth, adoption, fostering, other short- and long-term arrangements) but for the purpose of the study, mothers are defined as women with children, whether that is natural born or adopted. Women within Canada who identified as Christians and mothers were potential participants of this study.

A Brief History of Mothering

As one of the oldest practices, mothering has been viewed inconsistently throughout Christian history. As Amy E. Marga says, “there has not been a single overarching

⁷ McGrath, *Christian Spirituality*, 2.

narrative of mothers and mothering in Christian thought.”⁸ There is, however, a consistent thread of the pursuit of faith and the knowledge and experience of God as women engage in the practice of mothering while navigating male-dominated Christian theology and the circumstances of their time.

In ancient times, women’s bodies and their maternal functions are considered “obstacles to pure devotion to God.”⁹ According to Marga, “the ideal life for an early Christian woman was not motherhood but its opposite: childless virginity. As a virgin, a woman’s body was untouched by sexuality and the blood of birth; without children, a woman could focus all of her attention on God.”¹⁰ Sexuality and women’s bodily fluids are treated with suspicion or regarded as outright evil while the mother-child bond is considered an earthly attachment. As a result, some women pursue faith as mother-martyrs, like second-century Perpetua and Felicitas, or in monastic communities, like Paula (347–404).¹¹ Rather than motherhood as a positive spiritual state, virginity (and thus, childlessness) is upheld as the ideal. Even though the Incarnation involved a maternal body, a persistent negative view remains. Early church father Tertullian is aghast that God loved humanity so much that he was willing to be “curdled in the uncleanness of the womb.”¹² However, for many women, monastic life and virginity are not options and they live their faith as wives and mothers even though marriage and mothering are considered suboptimal. Therefore, women in ancient times are part of

⁸ Marga, *In the Image of Her*, 17.

⁹ Marga, *In the Image of Her*, 19.

¹⁰ Marga, *In the Image of Her*, 20.

¹¹ Marga, *In the Image of Her*, 24–25.

¹² Marga, *In the Image of Her*, 46.

monastic female communities, mother-martyrs, or at home as wives and mothers, as their faith directs and circumstances allow.

During the medieval ages, motherhood begins to become more complex. Noelia Molina refers to a collection of texts that emerged in the 11th and 12th centuries called *The Trotula*, informing women on female health topics, such as menstruation, fertility, pregnancy, and childbirth.¹³ Along with this raised awareness of maternal issues, female saints also become more prominent. For example, Julian of Norwich portrays God maternally, writing “as truly as God is our Father, just as truly is God our Mother.”¹⁴ Catherine of Siena boldly addresses Pope Gregory XI regarding clergy integrity but disparagingly refers to herself as his “unworthy daughter” and a “poor and miserable woman.”¹⁵ Although maternal issues and the feminine voice become more prevalent, negative views of the human body and female sexuality persist, which Orthodox theologian Carrie Frederick Frost credits to the fact that the theological thinkers at the time are almost exclusively male.¹⁶ Virginity continues to be upheld as the spiritual ideal and female monastic communities flourish, with Mary and female saints providing spiritual support and guidance to both those in monastic communities and mothers at home with children. Rival tensions regarding virginity and mothering are evident, even though marriage is considered a sacrament, it seems “a lesser spiritual state than celibacy.”¹⁷ Marriage is seen as permissible, but virginity and celibacy are often held up as the preferred way of holiness.¹⁸

¹³ Molina, *Motherhood, Spirituality and Culture*, 11.

¹⁴ Starr, *Julian of Norwich*, 163.

¹⁵ MacHaffie, *Readings in Her Story*, 66–67.

¹⁶ Frost, *Maternal Body*, 49.

¹⁷ Bass, *People's History of Christianity*, 189.

¹⁸ Hunter, *Marriage and Sexuality in Early Christianity*, 21.

Despite that it is Mary's virginity (rather than motherhood) deemed worthy of emulation, many mothers continue to look to Mary the mother of Jesus as someone who had given birth, suffered, and understood the practice of mothering. A theology of attachment to Mary becomes popular, even extending to the scholastic community. For instance, Anselm Bishop of Canterbury "called upon Mary to protect him, not with her spiritual authority, her virginity, or her status as Queen of heaven, but as a mother."¹⁹ His reverence for Mary is evident in his "Prayer to St. Mary":

Blessed assurance, safe refuge,
The mother of God is our mother.
The mother of him in whom alone we have hope
Is our mother.
The mother of him who alone saves and condemns is our mother.²⁰

Bernard of Clairvaux is known as a prominent male theologian who has a close attachment to Mary. He focuses especially on Mary's breast milk, as is evident in the story of the virgin Mary statue coming to life and letting three drops of milk drop into Bernard's mouth.²¹ Mary's breasts and breast milk are seen as lifegiving, even at times made analogous to Christ's blood.²² In the 16th century, however, Luther and other Reformers respond to the emphasis of and sometimes sexualized version of Mary by redirecting attention to Christ alone.

The Reformation marks an important turn in terms of mothering, as the "home became the Protestant equivalent of the monastery."²³ The Reformers greatly value mothers as those who kept the family together. Luther's marriage to ex-nun Katharina

¹⁹ Marga, *In the Image of Her*, 80.

²⁰ Anselm, *Prayers and Meditations*, 122.

²¹ Sperling, "Squeezing, Squirting, Spilling Milk," 894.

²² Marga, *In the Image of Her*, 85.

²³ Bass, *People's History of Christianity*, 190.

von Bora encourages others towards marriage and children as a respected Christian practice and he teaches that mothering is the “noblest and most precious work.”²⁴

Luther’s encouragement to mothers in labour is as follows:

This is also how to comfort and encourage a woman in the pangs of childbirth, not by repeating St. Margaret legends and other silly old wives’ tales but by speaking thus, ‘Dear Grete, remember that you are a woman, and that this work of God in you is pleasing to him. Trust joyfully in his will and let him have his way with you. Work with all your might to bring forth the child. Should it mean your death, then depart happily, for you will die in a noble deed and in subservience to God. If you were not a woman you should now wish to be one for the sake of this very work alone, that you might thus gloriously suffer and even die in the performance of God’s work and will.’²⁵

Rather than virginity, mothering is viewed with high spiritual regard. It is a woman’s private life as mother rather than her public life as a woman and citizen that becomes the main focus. The ideal woman becomes the Protestant wife in a monogamous household of children. The Christian mothers are “good with children, obedient to their husbands, and skilled at housekeeping,” just as God created them to be.²⁶ Rather than Mary and a host of female saints as spiritual supports and models for women (an attachment which Marga might have become “too strong, too earthy, and too physically intimate for the Christian imagination,”) the focus is directed to the male body of Jesus.²⁷

During the Enlightenment, the American Revolution, and the Victorian era, mothers continue to lay the foundation of the home, the family, and society. The “Cult of Motherhood,” the “True Woman,” and the “Republican Motherhood” all stress the importance of the mother as the primary caretaker and nurturer of children within the

²⁴ As quoted from Luther, “The Estate of Marriage.” MacHaffie, *Readings in Her Story*, 71.

²⁵ As quoted from Luther, “The Estate of Marriage.” MacHaffie, *Readings in Her Story*, 70.

²⁶ Marga, *In the Image of Her*, 89.

²⁷ Marga, *In the Image of Her*, 90.

private sphere of the home, and out of the public arena.²⁸ Molina points out that this promotes a “gendered vision of citizenship that emphasized women’s domesticity.”²⁹ Also noteworthy is the colonial approach to mothering on behalf of White Protestant women in America, as they deemed their form of mothering and homemaking superior to Black and Indigenous approaches to mothering.³⁰

Through the twentieth and twenty-first century, mothering remains an important role for women, although the feminist movement opens doors for women into the workplace. This results in women being primarily responsible for the children and homemaking, along with performing well at their paying job. Today, it is sufficient to say that mothering is a complex and diverse practice, which requires research about mothering to be clearly situated, especially in regards to geographical location and social and religious context. Throughout Christian history and its emphasis on virginity, monastic life, devotion to Mary and female saints, and family life, women have continued to assume primary responsibility for childcare and rearing while practicing and embodying their faith in various contexts amidst changing pressures and expectations. Women have consistently engaged in the practice of mothering as an expression of their faith and as a spiritual practice.

God and Women’s Experience

Are Women Human?

“Are women human?” is the cheeky question Dorothy Sayer poses to listeners in 1938. Although Sayers was not a feminist, she challenges the notion of men and women as

²⁸ Molina, *Motherhood, Spirituality and Culture*, 12–13.

²⁹ Molina, *Motherhood, Spirituality and Culture*, 13.

³⁰ Marga, *In the Image of Her*, 148.

being entirely separate categories. Rather, she argues that male and female are “adjectives qualifying the noun ‘human being’ and that the substantive governs the modifier.”³¹ She claims that a woman’s experience is very much a human experience and does not need to be considered as something completely different. In her words, “a woman is just as much an ordinary human being as a man, with the same individual preferences, and with just as much right to the tastes and preferences of an individual.”³² Although Sayer’s witty argument is more centered around work, the thread I would like to pull out is that a woman’s experience with God is simply a human experience. On one hand, there need not be a separate category for women’s spiritual experience, for surely their experience is also human. Of course, God is interested and interactive in the lives of women, for they are human.

However, Sayers does note that “special knowledge” needs to be considered: “You cannot ask for ‘the woman’s point of view,’ but only for the woman’s special knowledge—and this, like all special knowledge, is valuable, though it is no guarantee of agreement.”³³ Pregnancy and childbirth would fall under the special knowledge category due to women’s unique biology. Therefore, on the other hand, the maternal experience is special knowledge and needs to be investigated as an unique human experience. Also, in feminist thought, women’s experience cannot be over-generalized or singularly defined.

Ruffing amplifies Sayers’s distinction of special knowledge, with a caution that viewing God as male has repercussions for women in terms of self-image and God-

³¹ Sayers, *Are Women Human?*, 3–4.

³² Sayers, *Are Women Human?*, 24.

³³ Sayers, *Are Women Human?*, 43.

image.³⁴ Due to our social history, it is not reasonable to expect women to be able to unreservedly, without complication, to fully embrace themselves and God. While men “tend to assume unconsciously that they are already Godlike” as the “birthright of their male embodiment,” women face difficulty in doing the same due to their biology.³⁵ She argues that women first need to claim full personhood, as beloved humans made in the image of God with the capacity for divine participation. Therefore, yes, women are human with special knowledge of pregnancy and birth, and, consequently, unique experiences of God which are worthy of theological discovery.

A Brief History of Women’s Spiritual Autobiographical Writing

The Christian practice of testimony is not new as people have been telling their stories since the beginning of time. Writing our spiritual autobiographies “is not a fad but an established practice of the church, as old as Augustine and as fresh as Anne Lamott.”³⁶ I will lay out a brief history of women’s spiritual autobiographical writing, to highlight some of the stories of women that have been preserved. There is a boldness and courage evident throughout these spiritual autobiographical writings, as well as a willingness and wit to discern how to speak in a way that would be acceptable in the Christian tradition in their time. Women’s spiritual autobiographical writings are not actively promoted throughout Christian history, so women are often left to find creative and unconventional approaches. Evident in their writing is a clear sense of calling and devotion to Christ alone.

³⁴ Ruffing, *Spiritual Direction*, 130.

³⁵ Ruffing, *Spiritual Direction*, 130.

³⁶ Lischer, “Writing the Christian Life,” para. 3.

Although St. Augustine's *Confessions* (written near the end of the 4th century) does not fall within the realm of women's spiritual autobiographical writing, it is important to mention simply because it is generally regarded as the first Christian spiritual autobiographical writing. Richard Lischer reminds us that spiritual autobiographical writing is powerful because it features the power of the gospel: "It doesn't preach, it shows."³⁷ There is a definite arc to Augustine's testimony of sin to salvation, as his story illustrates the work of God in his own life. While St. Augustine's conversion is the climax, contrasting life before and after following Christ, Augustine weaves his own life with the work of God continuously throughout his spiritual autobiography.³⁸ As Lischer says, "if you acknowledge only the divine, you get hagiography. If you focus only on your own life, you run the risk of narcissism."³⁹ His mother Monica and her prayers play a key role throughout his life. Augustine testifies that God listened to his mother's prayers, "gave ear to her pleas," and "didn't look down on her tears."⁴⁰ Evident in Augustine's *Confessions*, this is what makes autobiographical writing spiritual in nature—attention is fixed on both the human experience and the Divine.

Regarding women's spiritual autobiographical writing, Perpetua is one of the first martyrs of the early church whose story has endured. Though there were women disciples and women involved in the early church, Perpetua is one of the first women in Christian history to record her own experience. Perpetua and Felicitas, along with four

³⁷ Lischer, "Writing the Christian Life," para. 9.

³⁸ This point is illustrated in Book 1, when Augustine says, "To sum up, I would not exist, my God, I would not exist at all, unless you existed in me. Or is it rather I would not exist unless I existed in you, from whom, through whom, in whom, everything exists?" Augustine, *Confessions*, 5.

³⁹ Lischer, "Writing the Christian Life," para. 6.

⁴⁰ Augustine, *Confessions*, 71.

other catechumens, were martyred in Carthage in 202CE. It is generally acknowledged that Perpetua authored most of the writings, though they were perhaps edited by Tertullian.⁴¹ Her story begins with her father visiting her in jail, begging her to lay aside her convictions and come home to her infant. Perpetua famously responded, “I cannot be called anything else than what I am, a Christian.”⁴² Perpetua’s account is an “extraordinary survival of a woman’s voice in the Christian history,” as she refuses to bow to cultural and familial pressure.⁴³

In 1884, historian and archaeologist G. F. Gamurrini discovers an ancient travel diary, outlining a woman’s pilgrimage to Jerusalem from around the 5th century. Pilgrim Egeria records her three-year travel details and personal reflections in a book known as *Egeria: Diary of a Pilgrimage*.⁴⁴ She visits many biblical and devotional sites and describes the liturgy practices in Jerusalem. Although there is little known about her personal life, it is out of the ordinary for a woman to make this journey and to record it in writing. However, her desire to know Christ and to be familiar with his life is evident throughout facilitation of the journey and her travel diary.

As younger brother and student, St. Gregory of Nyssa records the life, reflections, and spiritual insights of St. Macrina, one of the Cappadocian Mothers. The *Life of Macrina* is the basis of J. M. Roberts’ rendition of Macrina’s life, *Life of Saint Macrina the Younger and Her Family of Saints*, which relies on historical detail and imagines some fictional dialogue. Much of her teachings, conversation, and even her last

⁴¹ Oden, ed., *In Her Words*, 26.

⁴² Oden, ed., *In Her Words*, 26.

⁴³ Malone, *Women and Christianity*, 106.

⁴⁴ For further reading, Lynn H. Cohick and Amy Brown Hughes dedicate Chapter 6 to Egeria in their book *Christian Women in the Patristic World*. Cohick and Hughes, *Christian Women in the Patristic World*, 140–41.

prayer before her death is narrated through St. Gregory of Nyssa, and thus, has survived today.⁴⁵ Macrina is famous for teaching Gregory of Nyssa, Basil of Caesarea, and Gregory of Nazianzus, who would become known as the Cappadocian Fathers. Macrina is called “the ‘Christian Socrates,’ as she was virgin, philosopher, teacher, scripture scholar, and monastic founder. She was a genius in a family of geniuses.”⁴⁶ Macrina, along with the other Cappadocian Mothers and Fathers, advocates for both virginity and marriage as acceptable and worthy spiritual states, proposing a metaphorical view of virginity that pertains to one soul.⁴⁷ Virginity of soul is understood as a singular devotion to Christ, which is possible for single and married women. Therefore, for a brief period of history, married life is “viewed as an alternate path to *theosis* as compared to virginity.”⁴⁸ Not only did Macrina teach the men in her family, but she also proposes new theological understandings, refusing to bow to cultural expectations of marriage or church expectations of what a woman’s life should look like.

In the 9th century, a Frankish noblewoman named Dhuoda writes *Handbook for William*, a book that has recently begun to receive attention.⁴⁹ Separated from her sons in a time of war and political maneuverings, Dhuoda desires to teach her children spiritual truths and life wisdom. Thus, her book *Handbook for William* is born. Dhuoda upholds patriarchal views (“Now I must do my best to guide you in how you should fear,

⁴⁵ Roberts, *Life of Saint Macrina*, 134–35.

⁴⁶ Malone, *Women and Christianity*, 142.

⁴⁷ Sunberg, *Cappadocian Mothers*, 114.

⁴⁸ Sunberg, *Cappadocian Mothers*, 116.

⁴⁹ Carol Neel, translator for *Handbook for William*, mentions in the introduction that until 1975, the *Handbook for William* was only available in a 19th century publication and based on two faulty manuscripts. In the 1950’s, a medieval copy was discovered which corrected and authenticated Dhuoda’s writing, and Pierre Riché, an expert of Carolingian education, published Dhuoda’s text in 1975. Dhuoda, *Handbook for William*, xiii.

love, and be faithful to your lord and father, Bernard, in all things”⁵⁰) and yet gently challenges the notion that women ought to be silent in theological conversations. Although her audience is narrow, being her two sons, somehow the *Handbook for William* is preserved and published as a substantial text by a female author from the Carolingian period. The fact that she is a married woman, and not part of a monastic community, is also worthy to note.

The Flowing Light of the Godhead, written by Mechthild of Magdeburg in the 13th century is an example of spiritual autobiographical writing from the lay woman’s monastic movement known as the Beguines. The Beguines are unusual in that they do not require formal monastic vows but embrace simplicity, chastity, compassion to the poor, and the call to personal holiness. They usually live together in community and are savvy businesswomen, which is insulting to powerful medieval men, according to Laura Swan.⁵¹ The Beguines are known for their literary contribution of spiritual autobiographies, mystical treatises, passionate letters of spiritual direction, spiritual consolation, or moral exhortation, and poetry.⁵² Mechthild’s writings are collected and preserved by her spiritual director, Heinrich von Halle, who unfortunately arranges her writings according to his own ideas, rather than her own spiritual development.⁵³ Nevertheless, her seven “books” tell the story of her “inner journey toward God,” through “stunningly beautiful and provocative expressions of poetry and prose, monologue and dialogue—visions, letters, parables, reflections, allegories, prayers,

⁵⁰ Dhuoda, *Handbook for William*, 21.

⁵¹ Swan, *Wisdom of the Beguines*, 12.

⁵² Swan, *Wisdom of the Beguines*, 139.

⁵³ Mechthild of Magdeburg, *Flowing Light of the Godhead*, xxii.

criticism, and advice.”⁵⁴ Mechthild of Magdeburg is not only known as one of the first leaders of the German mystical movement, but she writes openly of her own spiritual journey (which is anomalous as a woman) and did not hesitate to criticize the church. She claims her authority as an author and preacher from God alone, which is indicated in the opening paragraph:

Ah! Lord God! Who has written this book? I in my weakness have written it, because I dared not hide the gift that is in it. Ah! Lord! What shall this book be called to Thy Glory? It shall be called *The Flowing Light of My Godhead* into all hearts which dwell therein without falseness.⁵⁵

The Beguine-defining characteristic of spiritual independence which Mechthild of Magdeburg exhibits, along with the insistence that “even the lowliest member of society could have a personal and intimate relationship with God,” is startling, and sometimes, intimidating to the church at large.⁵⁶ Despite the threats of heresy thrown her way, she continues to write of the love of God and the call to personal holiness.

The letters, prayers, and incarnational theology of Catherine of Siena (1347–1380) are recorded in *The Dialogue* while the visions and theological work of Julian of Norwich (1342–1416) are published as *Shewings* and *Revelations of Divine Love*. Catherine of Siena deals directly with the corruption within the church.⁵⁷ While Julian of Norwich pushes back against the medieval idea of women’s bleedings as being impure and portrays maternal blood as life-giving and full of love.⁵⁸ Born out of spiritual

⁵⁴ Swan, *Wisdom of the Beguines*, 143.

⁵⁵ Mechthild of Magdeburg, *Flowing Light of the Godhead*, 3.

⁵⁶ Swan, *Wisdom of the Beguines*, 145.

⁵⁷ Regarding the corruption among the clergy, Catherine of Siena directly said, “Not only does such iniquity stink to me, but even the devil finds this wretched sin repugnant.” Catherine of Siena, *Letters II*, 502. As quoted in Dreyer, *Accidental Theologians*, 68.

⁵⁸ Marga, *In the Image of Her*, 56.

conviction and devotion to Christ, both women confront what is culturally acceptable and boldly suggest new ways of thinking and being for the church.

From Stuart England (1603–1714) the writings of Dorothy Leigh, Elizabeth Joscelyn, and Elizabeth Richardson are known as mother’s legacies. During the 17th century women would give advice or blessing to their children as they neared the end of their life or even lay on their death bed. Brown notes that

Mothers’ legacies were not only a favoured genre with women, but had a wide readership as well. The general approbation that the genre enjoyed from the beginning suggests it did as much to confirm normative gender ideology as it did to disrupt it by giving women an authoritative voice and enabling them to write and publish. This is one of the troubling paradoxes of the genre: women speak authoritatively in the mother’s legacy, but only as mothers, and often as mothers on the point of dissolution.⁵⁹

These three courageous and discerning women write during a time when women do not write for public readership; yet they do just that. Women throughout Christian history seem to find a way and Leigh, Joscelyn, and Richardson write as mothers and for their daughters. Yet their writing is published publicly for all to read. It is a mother’s love, or as Dorothy Leigh says “it was the motherly affection that I bare unto you all,” that drives these written works and makes them acceptable in Stuart England.⁶⁰ Marga names Leigh’s *The Mother’s Blessing* (also known as *The Godly Counsel of a Gentle-Woman of Long Since Deceased, Left behind for Her Children*) published in 1616, as a “maternally minded public theology.”⁶¹ It is not simply a child-rearing manual or a private letter to her family members; instead it is “a public writing that both engaged

⁵⁹ Brown, ed, *Women’s Writing in Stuart England*, vii.

⁶⁰ Brown, ed, *Women’s Writing in Stuart England*, 22,

⁶¹ Marga, *In the Image of Her*, 124.

politics and critiqued church leaders.”⁶² In fact, some scholars see Leigh’s *The Mother’s Blessing* as the female companion to King James I’s *The Father’s Blessing*.⁶³

What is most interesting about the mother’s legacies is the way women write authoritatively (in a culturally acceptable way) for both men and women, but also create a genre of writing that is distinctly female. Marga observes that “writers like Leigh and Joscelin leverage their roles as mothers to permit themselves to write about theology without having to hide or apologize for their femaleness. They were mothers. In this way, these mothers’ legacies uphold gender stereotypes and subvert them at the same time.”⁶⁴

The letters, prayers, and journal writings of Susanna Wesley (1669–1742) reveal an experiential knowledge of and intimacy with God. She places her relationship with God above all other relationships. Wesley writes “unless at the same time we know him [God] experimentally, unless the heart perceive and know him [God],” it will avail us nothing.⁶⁵ She goes on to say that she does not despise or neglect reason, but that she desires personal and transformative knowledge of God.⁶⁶ Her *amen story* is still relevant hundreds of years later as an exhortation for women to obey God rather than man.⁶⁷ As the wife of a minister and the mother of the future fathers of Methodism, she does not

⁶² Marga, *In the Image of Her*, 125.

⁶³ Marga, *In the Image of Her*, 125.

⁶⁴ Marga, *In the Image of Her*, 132.

⁶⁵ Wallace, ed., *Susanna Wesley*, 321–22.

⁶⁶ Wallace, ed., *Susanna Wesley*, 322.

⁶⁷ In short, Wesley refuses to add her amen to her husband’s prayer for King William, to which her husband then refuses to touch her or come to bed with her. Though it cost her a year of marital pleasure, burdened her with a year of single parenting, and disrupted her relationship with her husband Samuel, she did not give in to the temptation to make peace at all costs. Wesley saw herself first as a woman of God, instead of a wife, mother, congregant member, or anything else, and sought to please God alone. The rest of Wesley’s story is that after twelve months of single parenting and a house fire in which she had to rescue the children; Samuel returned to the family home. Nine months later, Wesley gave birth to John Wesley, the father of Methodism. Wallace, ed., *Susanna Wesley*, 35.

idly sit back. Instead, with the spiritual gifts given her, she responds in obedience to the opportunities and callings that God gave her.

During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, there is a burst of missionary women's writing. Lillas Trotter is one such woman whose work is being rediscovered today, thanks to Miriam Huffman Rockness. *A Passion for the Impossible: The Life of Lillas Trotter* introduces readers to Trotter's life as artist, missionary to north Africa, and missiologist. Rockness also orchestrates the reprinting of Trotter's art and spiritual reflection journals, such as *Parables of the Cross* and *Parables of the Christ-Life*. Trotter's "seemingly paradoxical aspects of her personality: her reflective artistic nature and her disposition for active visionary leadership" are encapsulated and portrayed throughout her writing.⁶⁸ Though John Ruskin confidently predicts she will become an influential artist and a mission organization refuses her on the basis of ill health, Trotter uses her art in creative missiological ways as a lifetime missionary in North Africa. She remains faithful to her spiritual calling, despite the expectations and prohibitions of others.

Although not directly related to women's spiritual autobiographical writing, it is worthwhile to note that modern day scholars are amplifying the voice of women throughout Christian history. In 2022, Joy A. Schroeder and Marion Ann Taylor write *Voices Long Silenced: Women Biblical Interpreters Through the Centuries* which is a thorough investigation of female voices in Christian history. As biblical scholars, Schroeder and Taylor focus on female scriptural interpreters from around the globe from ancient times to present day. It is an impressive compilation of history and stories which

⁶⁸ Rockness, *Passion for the Impossible*, 187.

challenges the idea that biblical interpretation has historically only been a male venture. Along similar lines, Nijay K. Gupta is a male New Testament scholar who sees his book *Tell Her Story: How Women Led, Taught, and Ministered in the Early Church* as an “exercise in amplification” of women’s voices.⁶⁹ He argues that women have been there all along but they have been ignored. Texts like these acknowledge that women have been speaking throughout time and draw attention to these women’s voices and their theological contribution to Christian history.

Lay Women’s Spiritual Life Writing

Lay women’s spiritual life writing is an area of research that awaits further investigation. Practical theologians are faced with a challenge when it comes to studying Christian spirituality and motherwork due to a lack of sources, hermeneutical silences in existing texts, and narrow definitions of autobiography.⁷⁰ Wolfteich, as a strong proponent of mothering as a spiritual practice, has turned a “deep listening ear to women’s own maternal narratives—to practice listening and re-listening and telling and re-telling as ways into deeper understanding of mothering, work, and spirituality.”⁷¹ She advocates a way forward that includes “thinking creatively about life writing as spiritual practice, opening up possibilities for expanding source material, and integrating life writing further in theological education and spiritual direction/formation ministries.”⁷² Sacred storytelling, due to its episodic nature, is an accessible, but gently intriguing, form of spiritual autobiographical writing that is hospitable to women and everyday life.

⁶⁹ Gupta, *Tell Her Story*, 3.

⁷⁰ Wolfteich, *Mothering*, 168.

⁷¹ Wolfteich, *Mothering*, 13.

⁷² Wolfteich, *Mothering*, 168.

Therefore, focusing on the sacred tales of women as a sort of maternal, midwife-practical theologian enriches this area of Christian spirituality research. Telling these sacred tales not only gives us insight into a particular context and community, but that practical theologians can bring these sacred tales to light that bear “important spiritual insights, questions, vocabulary, and theological knowledge.”⁷³ Graham warns that because this is pioneering work, it will not be smooth or direct; however, she recognizes the recent pastoral and practical research from a feminist perspective has given us “a deeper form of knowledge about the world—a new validation of what it means to experience, to know, and to be in the world.”⁷⁴ I aspire to be a practical theologian who, like a spiritual director, listens and interprets cultural, social, and personal situations well, while also identifying how and where spirituality is being formed.

Regarding current lay women’s spiritual life writing, there is often an apologetic purpose. Jill Elizabeth Vogt’s research regarding Christian adults living in East Germany and Amanda Hontz Drury, who focuses on adolescents and telling one’s testimony, both explore spiritual autobiographies from an evangelistic approach.⁷⁵ Others focus on the healing and emotional well-being that is often associated with spiritual life writing. James J. Dillon finds that most people find the experience of spiritual autobiographical writing to be positively profound and wish to share their experiences with others.⁷⁶ For my research project, participants may find that the telling of their stories brings consolation, but the opposite may also happen. Sacred tales may

⁷³ Wolfteich, *Mothering*, 174.

⁷⁴ Graham, “Feminist Theory,” 198.

⁷⁵ Vogt’s thesis “This is My Story” focused on the purpose of facilitating life writing for the sake of testimony-telling to the younger generation. Amanda Hontz Drury’s book *Saying is Believing* focused on faith formation due to telling one’s testimony.

⁷⁶ Dillon, “Psychology and Spiritual Life Writing,” 137.

bring desolation and disorientation; nevertheless, they reveal something about the nature of God or themselves.⁷⁷ My sacred storytelling focus is more directed towards the connection between our human stories and the story of God, as our theology is uncovered and adjusted. Walton sees this as one of the most interesting developments in recent theological thinking, particularly for pastoral and practical theologians.⁷⁸ Due to the “close ties between our sense of who we are and our grasp of who God is,” lay women’s life writing is a key resource in developing our spiritual awareness and theology.⁷⁹

As Wolfeich notes, women’s lives are the subject of many blogs, memoirs, and private conversations; therefore, does not the narrative of women and the practice of mothering deserve theological research? Lay women’s work and motherwork are common and historical practices that have not yet been thoroughly and theologically investigated. Therefore, I would like to build on the research that Wolfeich, Miller-McLemore, Graham, Slee, and others have courageously and faithfully done by investigating the theological understandings within maternal narratives.

God and the Human Experience

Since we live in a God-created and God-with-us world, it is no surprise that our personal stories are imbued with the holy presence of God as God seeks us out and desires

⁷⁷ Even in times of desolation and disorientation in storytelling, there is a search for meaning that is “both a reaching out to God and a questioning of God’s way in our life.” Zylla, *Roots of Sorrow*, 79.

⁷⁸ The terms “practical theology” and “pastoral theology” are sometimes confused or used interchangeably. However, practical theology values both academic learning and experience as mutually informing, whereas pastoral theology is a branch of practical theology. According to Ward, practical theology is the theological study of human action and practices as a participatory knowledge of God, meaning that “the practice of theology is sharing in the life of God.” Pastoral theology then is a subset of practical theology which deals with theological approaches to pastoral care and counseling. (*Introducing Practical Theology*, 6, 71).

⁷⁹ Walton, *Writing Methods*, 91.

interaction with us. As skeptics and cynics, we try to dismiss rumors of such divine transcendence. We sit around and pluck blackberries, unsure of the burning bush in front of us. Our pragmatic and sensible minds, firmly planted in this postmodern secular age, do not easily imagine this earth being “crammed with heaven.”⁸⁰ Yet, there is a stubborn insistence that “even the most basic created realities that we observe as human beings carry an extra dimension” and that “the created world cannot be reduced to measurable, manageable dimension.”⁸¹ Though we see through a glass darkly, we rightly suspect intimations of God all around us and throughout our human experience.

Is God Close or Faraway?

God is the Divine One who is both transcendent and immanent. God is both far away and very near. Evan Howard explains the transcendence of God as not being so big or so old that God exists in all places, for all time.⁸² Instead, the transcendence of God means that God is the source of time and place. God simply transcends time and space. God is beyond. The very transcendence of God means that “all time and place are available to God and that God is present to all.”⁸³

On the other hand, God is immanent. Because God dwells within time and place, God is very close. According to Moltmann, it is possible to experience God “in, with, and beneath each everyday experience of the world, if God is in all things and if all things are in God, so that God himself ‘experiences’ all things in his own way.”⁸⁴ Being

⁸⁰ Browning, “From Aurora Leigh,” [n.d.].

⁸¹ Boersma, *Heavenly Participation*, 21.

⁸² Howard, *Brazos Introduction to Christian Spirituality*, 123.

⁸³ Howard, *Brazos Introduction to Christian Spirituality*, 123.

⁸⁴ Moltmann, *Spirit of Life*, 34.

able to perceive God in all things and all things in God depends on the Spirit of God as life. Job declares that “the Spirit of God has made me, and the breath of the Almighty gives me life” (Job 33:4). If God is life itself, then every experience of life itself can be an experience of God. Experiences of God reveal God’s immanence and transcendence because “in them God himself is present in us” and in the “immanence of our hearts we discover a transcendent depth.”⁸⁵

The human experience and the world itself only exist in God and could not exist any other way, for everything exists within the womb of God, to borrow a helpful phrase from Sallie McFague.⁸⁶ McFague advocates for the image of God as Mother, as it emphasizes that life can only come from God:

And it is clearly the parent as mother that is the stronger candidate for an understanding of creation as bodied forth from the divine being, for it is the imagery of gestation, giving birth, and lactation that creates an imaginative picture of creation as profoundly dependent on and cared for by divine life. There simply is no other imagery available to us that has this power for expressing the interdependence and interrelatedness of all life with its ground. All of us, female and male, have the womb as our first home, all of us are born from the bodies of our mothers, all of us are fed by our mothers. What better imagery could there be for expressing the most basic reality of existence: that we live and move and have our being in God?⁸⁷

I appreciate McFague’s portrayal of God as Mother and the One who gives birth to creation. This metaphor of the world existing within the womb of God helps us to grasp the connectedness and intimacy between God and humanity. The womb metaphor also helps us grasp the compassion of God as part of the fundamental character of God.⁸⁸ The picture of God as Mother is not only necessary to balance our picture of God as Father,

⁸⁵ Moltmann, *Spirit of Life*, 155.

⁸⁶ McFague, “Dearest Freshness Deep Down Things,” 117.

⁸⁷ Lott, ed., *Sally McFague*, 45.

⁸⁸ The two Hebrew words translated as compassion and womb are closely related and further explored in Chapter 6.

but the maternal imagery reveals truths about God that remain hidden in other images. The astounding thing is that, rather than God birthing creation, God allows creation to give birth to the God in the Incarnation.

A Sacramental Ontology

God does not only exist and creates but God covenants and interacts with the created world. Boersma promotes a sacramental ontology, or an understanding of reality that is sacramental or mysterious in character.⁸⁹ He differentiates between symbol and sacrament by saying that symbols point to a reality while a sacrament co-inheres with reality or actually participates in the mysterious reality to which they point.⁹⁰ A sacramental relationship between God and the world means that not only does the created world point to God but that it also somehow participates with God. Scripture passages like Acts 17:28, which state “for in him [God] we live and move and have our being” and Col 1:17, which says “he [Christ] is before all things and in him [Christ] all things hold together” support a sacramental connection and participation. As Boersma concludes, “because creation is a sharing in the being of God, our connection with God is a participatory, or real, connection—not just an external or nominal connection.”⁹¹

While created reality and the Divine are distinct entities, they are not cut off from each other. The created reality finds its significance within the life of God. As a Christian Platonist, Boersma believes that “in and through Christ, created (sensible) beings participate in God’s uncreated (spiritual) Being” and that “it is the eternal world

⁸⁹ Boersma, *Heavenly Participation*, 22.

⁹⁰ Boersma, *Heavenly Participation*, 23.

⁹¹ Boersma, *Heavenly Participation*, 24.

of forms that give meaning and significant to created things.”⁹² Therefore, the human and the divine are connected in a real way, as sacrament relationship implies something beyond meaning. It implies presence. If we try to separate the human from the divine, we “tear apart the beautifully woven cosmic tapestry.”⁹³

God, therefore, is in the world, and the world exists within God; but God is not reduced to the world, does not depend on the existence of the world for God’s existence, and God’s being goes beyond the world. Understanding that God is not all things and that God is ontologically distinct from created reality, there is a mysterious connection between the created world and God that allows for relationship, covenant, and even participation. Boersma argues that

with a sacramental ontology, one can be grateful for created reality precisely because, as a sacrament, it really makes present the heavenly reality of God himself. Thus, like participation and analogy, sacramental language recognized both the real presence of God in our earthly, time-space realities and the infinite transcendence of the mystery that is the triune God himself.⁹⁴

Therefore, the transcendent God is immanent and generously, though mysteriously, present in created reality and our ordinary lives, which makes sacred storytelling a part of our human existence.

God is Here, But Where?

Richard Peace, author of *Noticing God*, outlines seven places where we might experience these revelation moments or “brushes with God.”⁹⁵ mystical encounters, God in the ordinary, the still small voice, community, Scripture, church, and creation, culture,

⁹² Boersma, “All One in Christ,” 2020.

⁹³ Boersma, *Heavenly Participation*, 31.

⁹⁴ Boersma, *Heavenly Participation*, 187.

⁹⁵ Peace, *Noticing God*, 31.

and creativity.⁹⁶ Scripture and church are familiar places to notice God, and Peace's expansion of the possibilities is incredibly helpful. Our imagination is sparked as we wonder how God might show up at the playground or through a spontaneous conversation with a young child, or even through a feeling of anticipation or anxiety. His categories and accompanying stories are helpful as they expand the box in which we have traditionally made for Divine activity.

However, a pneumatological view of the presence of God throughout the biblical narrative emphasizes a broader and deeper understanding of the immanence of our transcendent God in ordinary life. Creation is our introduction to One God—Father, Son, and Spirit, as Life (or Love) and relationship: Therefore, wherever there is life, love, or relationship, God is present.⁹⁷ It is as if we have been imprinted with these things since the beginning of time. In Pentecostal theologian Steven Studebaker's words, "Gen 2:7 presents a pneumatological anthropology: to be human is to be a creature uniquely vitalized by God's Spirit for a unique relationship with God and creation."⁹⁸ The Spirit is present at Creation as dust people come to life, at the Incarnation as Mary becomes pregnant with the Son of God, and at Pentecost as the birth of the church takes place. The Spirit is the Breath of Life and therefore, cannot be disassociated from life or reality. Wherever there is life, we know that it is sustained by the Spirit. We are warned not to grieve the Holy Spirit, which includes a failure to notice and a refusal to participate in the divine dance of the Trinity (Eph 4:30). Peterson says that when we

⁹⁶ Peace, *Noticing God*, 16–18.

⁹⁷ Wilson, *God's Good World*, 74–75.

⁹⁸ Studebaker, *From Pentecost to the Triune God*, 62.

ignore or dismiss the Spirit, at the very least we are rude and at the worst, we are blasphemous.⁹⁹

Instead of categorizing the various places where God might show up, as Peace does, we see through the biblical narrative that the Spirit is Life and the sustainer of Life, and thus, always present. Studebaker warns that a dismissal of the Spirit leads to a “dualistic and hierarchical worldview that pits spiritual issues over worldly ones.”¹⁰⁰ Therefore, through a pneumatological understanding of the biblical narrative, we can be confident that our search for the Divine is not in vain. God is present—here and now in our ordinary lives, not just the seven categories that Peace suggests. In fact, “all God’s activity in the world is pneumatic” as we experience God in the Spirit as God’s pure presence.¹⁰¹

Situation of Research Project within the Larger Conversation

Within the larger conversation of women’s studies, mothering studies is receiving more attention as an area of academic research. Due to the wide and varied experiences of women, mothering studies is a diverse and rich field which is being explored from many different angles as it is experienced in the present time and throughout history. For example, in 1992, the Canadian Women’s Movement Archives were acquired by the University of Ottawa Library. Of particular interest is the 1985-86 exhibition by photographer Judith Lermer Crawley called *Giving Birth is Just the Beginning: Women Speak About Mothering*. It is a collection of “candid photos sought to bring the intimate

⁹⁹ Peterson, *Practice Resurrection*, 202.

¹⁰⁰ Studebaker, *From Pentecost to the Triune God*, 241.

¹⁰¹ Moltmann, *Spirit of Life*, 286.

world of mothering out of the shadows.”¹⁰² The Archives trace the continuing changing cultural views of motherhood, with the goal of bringing mothering into the public eye for deeper conversation and further research.

“Mothering Canada: Interdisciplinary Voices” is an anthology that reveals the complex and multi-faceted nature of mothering. With titles such as “Mothering Under Duress” Tuberculosis and Stigma in 1950s Rural Saskatchewan,” “Voices from the Moon Lodge,” and “Sick Mother, No Mother,” mothering in rural settings, mothering as an Indigenous woman, and mothering in the midst of illness highlight some of the various contexts of the practice of mothering. One reviewer calls it “a book of treasures,” emphasizing that this book “does not offer a complete or unified portrait of mothering in Canada. Instead, its pieces are like shards of light, illuminating aspects of the mothering experience.”¹⁰³

Recognizing again that mothering is not a universal experience due to socio-economic realities and other influences, Hee-Jeong Yoo and Christine Walsh explore how mothering is perceived and experienced by mothers with child welfare involvement. With their qualitative study of three mothers from Calgary, Alberta, they ask the question, “How do the narratives of mothers with child welfare involvement challenge good mothering ideology?”¹⁰⁴ Women with child welfare involvement experience a higher rate of homelessness, unemployment, and mental health concerns, with invariably affect mothering. This sort of research delves into mothering from yet another perspective.

¹⁰² LaLonde, “Changing Views on Mothering,” para. 2.

¹⁰³ Patterson, “Mothering Canada,” 290.

¹⁰⁴ Yoo and Walsh, “Mothering in the Context of Child Welfare,” 31.

The multi-dimensional nature of mother is evident as “the meanings and experiences of active leisure among first time mothers” is explored in the very recent study titled “Negotiating Intensive Mothering and the Gendered Politics of Active Leisure among First Time Mothers in Canada.”¹⁰⁵ Understanding that pregnancy is a significant experience for women that affects their sense of physical embodiment as they relate to their post-partum bodies, along with social relationships as they seek active leisure participation, the aim of the research is to help women transition into motherhood in a healthy social and physical manner.

These only represent some of the ways in which mothering is being investigated in the Canadian context. It is evident that mothering is a rich practice that requires continual study as mothering studies as an academic research area intersects with many other disciplines and changes throughout time due to cultural influences. One of those intersections is mothering and spirituality.

Molina acknowledges that academic study focusing on spirituality and motherhood has been minimal, since mothering has “always been considered ‘private work’, and a domain that did not have a ‘voice’ academically.”¹⁰⁶ Elizabeth Gandolfo agrees as she acknowledges that though the number of women theologians has increased in recent years, the “academic discipline of systematic theology is generally resistant to making a space for spiritual practice and personal experience (especially women’s spiritual practice and personal experience of embodiment) in its well-ordered, cerebral discourse.”¹⁰⁷ Christian spirituality has tended to disregard the female body and

¹⁰⁵ Trussell, “Negotiating Intensive Mothering,” 77.

¹⁰⁶ Molina, *Motherhood, Spirituality and Culture*, 5.

¹⁰⁷ Gandolfo, “Breastfeeding as Contemplative Practice,” 163.

practices such as mothering. However, there is growing interest in this area and there is increasing research related to the topic of mothering and spirituality. In this next section, I will explore the surrounding and supportive areas of interest to my research project within Christian spirituality and identify that the theology within maternal narratives is an uninvestigated theme. The themes of vocation and caring for children, the female body, God as Mother, and the spirituality of matrescence and mothering all intersect with and inform my research topic.

Vocation and Caring for Children

Miller-McLemore revives parenting as a spiritual practice in her book *In the Midst of Chaos*, which is the assumption of this research project. Pushing back against solitude and silence as the only or best way to meet God, she upholds caring for children as an ordinary yet deeply spiritual practice. As part of *The Practices of Faith* series, Miller-McLemore's book places mothering or caring for children firmly within the realm of spiritual practices, even though it does not look like other practices such as regular prayer times or quiet Scripture reading. Instead, she argues that the ordinary, chaotic, incessant task of caring for children can be spiritually formational through play, reading, taking children seriously, and other themes related to child rearing. She admits that when she first began mothering, she realized her responsibility in terms of shaping her children's faith but did not anticipate the way in which they would form her own faith.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁸ Miller-McLemore, *In the Midst of Chaos*, 26.

Miller-McLemore continues the theme of caring for children as work in *Also a Mother* and *Calling All Years Good*. Wolfeich also investigates the vocation of mothering in *Navigating New Terrain* and *Mothering, Public Leadership, and Women's Life Writing*. Mothering is affirmed as a spiritual vocation while its complexities are explored. Because mothering is unlike other spiritual callings and vocation, it deserves attention in its own right.

The Female Body

The female body, and specifically maternal body for the purposes of the research project, is receiving increasing interest among women theologians. The practice of mothering relies on the maternal body, which is the theological focus for dancer/theologian Celeste Snowber Schroeder, constructive theologian Natalie Carnes, womanist Christy Angelle Bauman, and Orthodox theologian Carrie Frederick Frost. Schroeder reflects on her pregnancy experiences, while considering the metaphor of the womb of God in her book *In the Womb of God*. In memoir-style, she contemplates the love of God as “womb-love” which is personally significant and transformative as she becomes a mother.¹⁰⁹ The experiential knowledge of the love of God is key, which also is clearly voiced through the research project interviews.

Carnes recognizes that theological work has historically been centered around a man's experience; now as a mother, she investigates the rebirth she experienced as she gave birth to her daughter. In *Motherhood: A Confession*, she asks questions such as: What if women's lives were “taken as significant sites for theological work? What if

¹⁰⁹ Schroeder, *In the Womb of God*, 109.

their bodies were seen as revelatory of human life as it encounters and fails to encounter divine presence?”¹¹⁰

In a similar vein, Bauman takes a serious look at a woman’s body as a way to know God in her book *Theology of the Womb*. Bauman connects the feminine physical acts of bleeding and birthing to God, viewing the life cycle of the uterus as the cycle of creation (waiting/growth, creation/birth, and burial/death).¹¹¹ She asks her readers to consider the practice of menstruation as “an invitation from God to his creation to remember that lifeblood must be shed in order for life to be created.”¹¹² Her work is a deep dive into the female physical body as a site for theological reflection, and at the same time, challenging the traditional masculine vision of God.

Frost echoes the idea that the “incarnational reality of the maternal body is meaningful.”¹¹³ She weaves her own experience of being pregnant with triplets while halfway through her PhD in theology with Orthodox understandings of women and mothering. She both affirms and challenges the Orthodox perspective, pointing out the ways in which women and their experiences are respected and appreciated while not being afraid to expose and question where Orthodox practice and theology disregard women and their maternal experiences (such as conflating miscarriage with abortion).¹¹⁴ She too views the maternal body as a site of theological reflection and theological discovery. Frost states that further theological work needs to be done regarding motherhood and believes that it is up to women (primarily, but not exclusively) to do

¹¹⁰ Carnes, *Motherhood*, 3.

¹¹¹ Bauman, *Theology of the Womb*, xxiv.

¹¹² Bauman, *Theology of the Womb*, 16.

¹¹³ Frost, *Maternal Body*, 87.

¹¹⁴ Frost, *Maternal Body*, 17.

that work, since they alone know the maternal body. She argues that “theological work on motherhood is obviously important and necessary for mothers, but I believe it is also necessary for the church.”¹¹⁵

God as Mother

Our view of God, particularly as it relates to the gender of God, is another theme related to women and mothering and the subject of this research project. Amy Peeler’s *Women and the Gender of God* is a recent and thorough exploration of this topic. Peeler asks questions regarding the nature of God—is God male? Why did Jesus come as male? Shall we call God Father or Mother? Her direct approach does not skirt the issues at hand but speaks to some of the key questions for women, especially, that have direct impact on how we experience and know God. Throughout her book, she strongly argues that God does indeed value women and that Jesus came as a man born from a woman like no other man. In the Incarnation, we see a “male-embodied Savior with female-provided flesh” who saves all.¹¹⁶

In a 1986 *Madelva Lecture in Spirituality*, Sandra M. Schneiders also delves into the gender of God. Prompted by McFague’s argument that the metaphor of God as Father has become literalized over the years due to patriarchal influences,¹¹⁷ Schneiders addresses the gender of God and Jesus. From a slightly different angle than Peeler, Schneiders states that Jesus had to come as male because it was the only way to upset the cultural system of prejudice and bias:

¹¹⁵ Frost, *Maternal Body*, 87.

¹¹⁶ Peeler, *Women and the Gender of God*, 137.

¹¹⁷ McFague argues that metaphor is the richest narrative structure in which to understand God. She says that personal metaphors, such as mother, lover, friend, allow us to see “God’s activity in the world as radically relational, immanent, interdependent, and noninterventionist.” (*Sallie McFague*, 37).

The maleness of Jesus was certainly not an exaltation of masculinity or a revelation of the sex of God. On the contrary, Jesus accepted membership in the oppressor class of society in order, from within, to demonstrate the bankruptcy of the dominative social system. Only as a man could he have subverted the accepted definition of masculinity, validated the so-called feminine virtues despised by men but dear to God, redefined the relationship between women and men as one of equality and mutuality, and destroyed patriarchy's claims to divine sanction.¹¹⁸

In this way, Jesus liberated women through his life and ministry, but also his birth.

In 1984, Margaret Hebblethwaite wrote *Motherhood and God*, in which she found God in motherhood and found motherhood in God. She recognizes that throughout her Catholic upbringing, the Church or Mary were viewed as mothers, but not God. However, the experience of motherhood changed that for her as she says "it is this relationship [mother-child], therefore, that is privileged as the model for the God who creates us, cherishes us, nourishes us and bestows on us the gift of love. We cannot but accept that God is our mother."¹¹⁹

The Spirituality of Matrescence and Mothering

Finally, the spirituality of matrescence and mothering is a theological theme that focuses on the spiritual issues, formation, and experiences of women and the practice of mothering. In *Mothering, Public Leadership, and Women's Life Writing*, Wolfteich theologically reflects on a variety of mothers' autobiographical writing. The writings of Margery Kemp, Jane de Chantal, Dorothy Day, and others have been preserved throughout the years and are part of the rich but limited pool of autobiographical writings by mothers available to us today. Wolfteich analyzes these writings for themes

¹¹⁸ Schneiders, *Women and the Word*, 63.

¹¹⁹ Hebblethwaite, *Motherhood and God*, 139.

such as vocation and Sabbath. Underlying these case studies, Wolfteich confirms that mothering is a spiritual practice. She admits that mothering has not traditionally been recognized as a part of Christian spirituality and recognizes the gaps between traditional Christian autobiographical texts and everyday practices of mothering.¹²⁰ As a key practical theologian in the area of Christian spirituality and mothering, Wolfteich notices the lack of attention given to the “particular spiritual issues and narratives of mothers.”¹²¹ In response, she has devoted much of her scholarly work to issues of spirituality and mothering. In her words, the task of practical theology is to “think through how mothering is and can be more abundantly life-giving, how we can better sustain mothers in the constellation of practices that make up this way of life, and how mothers can, from the depths of their experience, share their own questions and spiritual-practical wisdom with the larger community.”¹²² She cautions against the temptation to only view mothering as a way of seeing how theology is played out; instead, she argues that the study of maternal spiritual narratives exposes theology and reveals knowledge of God. This is an important distinction.

A researcher of female faith development, Slee is a pioneer in terms of feminist practical theology. Her book *Women's Faith Development* identifies alienation, awakenings, and relationality as the formation pattern of faith growth among women. Trudelle Thomas is also interested in the spirituality of motherhood and how a woman's spiritual life and maternal life intersect. Her book, *Spirituality in the Mother Zone*, expands spirituality as something that is experienced within the four walls of the church

¹²⁰ Wolfteich, *Mothering*, 1.

¹²¹ Wolfteich, *Mothering*, 1.

¹²² Wolfteich, *Mothering*, 4.

to the embodied experience of mothering. She urges women to theologically consider their own experience: “Paying attention to our experiences as mothers is an integral part of the process of authentically encountering God.”¹²³ With reference to Elizabeth Johnson’s book, *She Who Is*, Thomas pictures the Holy Spirit as Sophia, the Wise Woman—the One who knows and understands her lived experience, and at the same time, One who guides and teaches. It is her experience of mothering that deepens not only her own faith, but can also theologically feed the whole community of faith.

The spiritual importance of mothering and the theological reimagination that is necessary is the focus of *Parenting as Spiritual Practice and Source for Theology*. Co-edited by Claire Bischoff, Elizabeth O-Donnell Gandolfo, and Annie Hardison-Moody, this collection of papers affirms mothering as a source for theology, understands the complexity of the spirituality of mothering, and gives space for new voices to speak. Rather than separating gender studies and theology, these editors give a spacious space for a diversity of topics, ranging from miscarriage to African American motherhood to parenting elders. Beth M. Stovell, editor of *Making Sense of Motherhood: Biblical and Theological Perspectives*, does something similar in terms of acknowledging the varied topics that fall under spirituality and mothering. The foreword of the book is also certain to point out that this is topic not only for mothers or women but that the “hidden strength of this work is its unflinching focus on the reality of the embodied life.”¹²⁴ The diversity of authors and the wide range of topics represents the complexity and tensions within mothering.

¹²³ Thomas, *Spirituality in the Mother Zone*, 4.

¹²⁴ Stovell, ed., *Making Sense of Motherhood*, xv.

Introduction to Research Project

This research project focuses on the intersection of mothering and spirituality in the Canadian context. Specifically, I seek to amplify the maternal voices within the free church tradition among Evangelical Protestant women in Canada. This includes faith traditions such as Baptist, Brethren in Christ, and Pentecostal. It is important to locate the research project within an understanding of spirituality as sacred storytelling often reveals and challenges embedded theology. As in any faith tradition, there are understandings of God and self that are promoted within the free church tradition. Often, it is embedded theology and not clearly understood. In fact, our embedded theology “may seem so natural and feel so comfortable that we carry it within us for years, unquestioned and perhaps even unspoken.”¹²⁵ It is the theology that is rooted or embedded in the teaching and practices of a church tradition and conveyed through language, stories, rituals, and customs. It is often known as “first order theology.”¹²⁶

As one might expect, life often introduces experiences (such as mothering) that disrupt our embedded theology. We experience things that cause us to theologically reflect and we begin to question our embedded theology. As we challenge previous convictions and understandings, a new understanding of faith emerges that is called deliberative theology.¹²⁷ The goal of deliberative theology is to reflect “on multiple understandings of the faith implicit in the life and witness of Christians in order to identify and/or develop the most adequate understanding possible.”¹²⁸

¹²⁵ Stone and Duke, *How to Think Theologically*, 15.

¹²⁶ Stone and Duke, *How to Think Theologically*, 15.

¹²⁷ Stone and Duke, *How to Think Theologically*, 18.

¹²⁸ Stone and Duke, *How to Think Theologically*, 18.

As the participants in the research study engage in sacred storytelling about their mothering experience, they come with an embedded theology which is often disrupted through the experience of mothering and then disrupted again through the experience of sacred storytelling. Mothering is the experience which challenges previous notions about faith and understandings of God and provides the opportunity for new understandings to form. As evidenced in the interviews, participants often say things like “I know this sounds weird to say out loud” and “I’ve never actually said this.” After commenting on the maternal nature of God, one participant refers to the statement she has just articulated and remarks (almost to herself), “Mmmm. That’s interesting, isn’t it?”

Although mothering and spirituality is being explored from various angles, the theology within maternal narratives does not seem to be addressed. Therefore, this research project will investigate mothering and spirituality from a slightly different perspective as I ask the question, “What do women know about God through the practice of mothering?” For this research project on mothering and spirituality within the Canadian context, the ten participants represent a rich diversity within the free church tradition.

During the interviews, the participants reflect on the spirituality of mothering. I ask if mothering feels like a spiritual experience and there is unanimous agreement that pregnancy and mothering is a spiritual experience. Although P7 initially admits that “pregnancy didn’t feel like a sacred experience; it felt almost like a shame,” she is glad that now “women are free to wear tight shirts and to show off their bellies,” recognizing that there is more openness and freedom to talk about babies and to be obviously pregnant. At the same time, she remembers an inherent pride in being pregnant and wearing a maternity shirt that she had sewn. P8 says pregnancy was a beautiful

experience for her, even though she realizes that many women experience it and in some ways is merely biological: “It seems miraculous. Like, it’s ordinary and happens every day, but it’s also supernatural, out of this world.” P8 says that “mothering is just so spiritual in nature, it’s a little inherent.” Time spent mothering over the years has only confirmed that for her. Mother of five children, P10 uses words like “treasure” and “miracle” to describe the gift of mothering. Even though she has experienced birth multiple times, she says the awareness of the gift of human life only grows. She finds it “mind-boggling” and confirms that the joys outweigh the struggles. Each birthday is a time for her to sit back and marvel at the gift she has been given to mother, recognizing it as an “undeserved grace.” She is emotional as she spoke these words and could not hold back the tears. Finally, P2 expresses the paradigm shift that she underwent as she moved from church ministry being the most important calling to mothering as also being an important “kingdom calling.” She confesses that it “was a hard journey,” and that she loved church planting and the leadership roles she played. A lot of her identity and purpose centered around her work at church and through prayer and the passage of time, God revealed to her that nothing “is enough, that this is significant, this is kingdom work, this matters.” Although church ministry had always been seen as spiritual work, she realizes that mothering is also spiritual in nature.

During the research interviews, I invite the participants to reflect on experiences of revelation within the practice of mothering. The interview questions are designed to help the participants to reflect on their experience of the practice of mothering, to be attentive to their personal experiences of revelation and knowledge of God, and to engage in further theological reflection.

Transition to Research Project

Therefore, since the “retrieving and critically engaging the narratives of mothers is an important task for practical theology and the study of spirituality,” this research project seeks to be a part of this field of academic research.¹²⁹ For women, the experience of mothering as part of the human experience is a valid and important spiritual practice and a valid way to know God. This sets the stage for the research project—that the narrative lens can help women know God through the spiritual practice of mothering. Particularly, it is the theology within the maternal narratives that is the focus of the research project. The question now is—what do women know about God through the practice of mothering?

¹²⁹ Wolfeich, *Mothering*, 151.

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND DESIGN

The methodology and methods employed for this dissertation reflect a practical theology and practice-led research approach. Methodology and methods are easily confused or conflated. To clarify, a methodology is “a set of principles and ideas that inform the design of a research study” while methods are “practical procedures used to generate and analyze data.”¹ Graham’s theological reflection method known as ‘Theology by Heart’ serves as an anchor methodology for the project, supported and exemplified by the work of psychoanalyst Marion Milner and chaplain and clinical pastoral educator Anton Boisen. The research methods utilized for data collection include semi-structured interviews, with the aid of photo elicitation as a prompt to further reflection. Poetic data analysis is used to analyze the women’s narratives of experiencing God within the practice of mothering and poetic representations are created from the narratives and then affirmed by the participants. Slee’s themes of alienation, awakenings, and relationality are used as an initial analysis, followed by an extraction and thematic organization of the participants’ conceptions of God as revealed through the poetic representations. I follow up with each of the participants with a reflexive poetic response of my own. Ethical considerations and limitations of research design are included in this chapter.

¹ Birks and Mills, *Grounded Theory*, 4.

Methodology

Practical Theology and Practice-led Research

The research project is within the practical theology field and its approach is practice-led, qualitative, and interpretative. In terms of practice-led research, the starting place for the project is not theory or academia, but the practical human experience of mothering. Terry Veling argues that because everything lies in God, this changes the way we are meant to be in this world, meaning that we are to respect and live deeply into the human experience.² It is in our human experience, specifically the practice of mothering for this project, where we experience God and out of which our sacred storytelling emerges. Sacred storytelling is a way to cultivate practical wisdom or embodied knowledge, which is the purpose of practical theology.

Storytelling within spiritual direction is a form of practical theology as it follows an “experience–theology–experience rhythm and is highly attentive to the grace of experience as theological source.”³ Likewise for this project, the participant brings her life experience to the research interviews and throughout conversation, implicit theology is made explicit. The project produces qualitative data, as the interview transcripts are descriptive, interpretation-based, and relating to language. I use an interpretative approach as I construct their sacred tales directly from the research interview narratives and then extract and organize their conceptions of God from what is expressed.

In “Narrative Approaches,” Ganzevoort acknowledges that “religious practices that form the core material for theological reflection in practical theology are often

² Veling, *Practical Theology*, 205.

³ Ruffing, “Practice of Spiritual Direction,” 192.

directly related to narratives.”⁴ When it comes to making sense of our human experience and our experience with God, narrative allows us to access, understand, and interpret the events in our life through theological reflection. Practical theology is concerned with the “narrative structure of how we understand and live our lives” and that “meaningful action and identity can be interpreted as ‘text’.”⁵ The subjectivity of sacred storytelling is part of the narrative approach, as objective truth, reason, and empirical analysis step aside. In fact, the narrative approach implies a “strong and positive attention to the narrator’s subjectivity.”⁶ Rather than storytelling only revealing the historicity of one’s life, storytelling or spiritual autobiographical writing is a sort of dialogue that involves meaning making and interpretation. As Ganzevoort says, “a narrative approach then sees practices and stories more as performative than as representative.”⁷

Starting with Experience

Graham’s methodology called “Theology by Heart: The Living Human Document” is a method of theological reflection that “looks to the self and the interior life as the primary space in which theological awareness is generated and nurtured.”⁸ The self and one’s lived experience is considered as a primary text. Her methodology generates theological awareness by paying attention to our “heartfelt inner experience.”⁹ Theological reflection takes place through such means as Scripture, personal letters, journaling, and autobiography as we review, reflect, and become more self-aware and God-aware as we

⁴ Ganzevoort, “Narrative Approaches,” 214.

⁵ Ganzevoort, “Narrative Approaches,” 215.

⁶ Ganzevoort, “Narrative Approaches,” 216.

⁷ Ganzevoort, “Narrative Approaches,” 217.

⁸ Graham, et. al., *Theological Reflection: Sources*, 51.

⁹ Graham, et. al., *Theological Reflection: Sources*, 51.

capture these reflections and new insights in written form. The texts that result from this method are referred to as “living human documents,” as the texts take on a life of their own and converse with others in a public setting.¹⁰

Graham’s methodology pays attention to deep personal experiences that are expressed through writing that then become a “source of theological sensitivity.”¹¹ These lived experiences which are presented in written form contain “the perspective of their authors” but also witnesses their “conversational encounters with other people, other world-views, and with God.”¹² Graham refers to psychoanalyst and therapist Marion Milner who kept personal journals and founder of the *Clinical Pastoral Education* movement Anton Boisen who initiated the use of verbatim accounts of pastoral sessions for analysis.

Milner kept a journal to discover what made her happy. Her method is to identify moments in her daily life that made her happy, record them in writing, and then “go over these records” to see what she could learn.¹³ She draws from anything and everything that brings her “special happiness,” seems “important”, and gives her “delight.”¹⁴ Milner discovers the trick is to keep herself “particularly alert to any little movements going on in the back of my mind, passing ideas which were often quite irrelevant to my task of the moments and which I would never have noticed in the ordinary way.”¹⁵ She calls these moments “butterflies” for “they silently fluttered in from nowhere and were gone in a moment.”¹⁶ She acknowledges that the writing is an essential part of the process. She

¹⁰ Graham, et. al., *Theological Reflection: Sources*, 52.

¹¹ Graham, et. al., *Theological Reflection: Methods*, 18.

¹² Graham, et. al., *Theological Reflection: Methods*, 18.

¹³ Milner, *A Life of One’s Own*, xxxiii.

¹⁴ Milner, *A Life of One’s Own*, 15.

¹⁵ Milner, *A Life of One’s Own*, 87.

¹⁶ Milner, *A Life of One’s Own*, 87.

says that “sometimes the meaning of an experience would only begin to dawn on me years afterwards, and even then I often had to go over the same ground again and again, with intervals of years between. In fact, I came to the conclusion that the growth of understanding follows an ascending spiral rather than a straight line.”¹⁷ As she reflects on her writing experiment, she realizes the act of writing allows her to see and understand things in a deeper way and that the effort of writing makes her “more observant of the small movements of the mind.”¹⁸ The reflexivity necessary for writing about one’s life is “an acknowledgement of the significance of the self in forming an understanding of the world.”¹⁹ Milner’s journals continue to be read and analyzed today, as a representation of this methodology, as she hoped that others might find this methodology enlightening.²⁰

Graham also refers to Anton Boisen, chaplain and founder of the *Clinical Pastoral Education* movement. Boisen is regarded as one of the first to bring together theology and psychotherapy, specifically known for initiating the use of verbatim reports from pastoral practice for supervision purposes.²¹ The verbatim reports capture parts of the conversation, including silences and body language. Comments and notes are then made in the margins while the supervisor and practitioner go through the report, making note of questions, best responses, and interior movements. The use of verbatim reports are applauded as they “greatly enhance self-awareness” and “generate theological reflection as different resources from the Christian tradition.”²²

¹⁷ Milner, *A Life of One’s Own*, 33.

¹⁸ Milner, *A Life of One’s Own*, 47.

¹⁹ Graham, et. al., *Theological Reflection: Methods*, 20.

²⁰ Milner, *A Life of One’s Own*, xxxiv.

²¹ Graham, et. al., *Theological Reflection: Methods*, 35.

²² Graham, et. al., *Theological Reflection: Methods*, 38–39.

Graham's methodology of paying attention to the human experience and then expressing it in written form provides the framework for the project. I view my research participants' experiences of mothering expressed in the interviews as a sort of sacred text (oral and written) that not only increase their awareness of their own experience but also reveal and form the inherent maternal theology within their sacred stories. To summarize, this methodology enables "reflection upon the self by examining documents that turn-life-into-text."²³

Methods

Semi-Structured Interviews

The advantage of semi-structured interviews is that the researcher has a list of prepared questions to guide the interview, but there is also an openness to new questions and new directions in conversation as the interview proceeds.²⁴ This allows the participants to speak more generally, gives them a sense of agency, and allows for back-and-forth dialogue to support the conversation as needed. During the interviews, I ask if the photos elicit any thoughts or memories. I ask questions like, "How have you experienced God in the practice of mothering?" and "As a mother, tell me what you have learned about God."²⁵ These questions are intentionally open-ended, so the participant has freedom to talk about what she likes. I use prompts such as "Tell me more" and "What you are saying is" as needed. I borrow Elizabeth J. Andrew's technique for spiritual autobiographical writing called "stretching the moment."²⁶ This involves pausing and

²³ Graham, et. al., *Theological Reflection: Methods*, 20.

²⁴ Luhrmann, "Interview Methods," 348.

²⁵ See Appendix D for Interview Questions.

²⁶ Andrew, *Writing the Sacred Journey*, 175.

lingering over an experience, taking note of the details. This is especially important for participants who “underwrite,” or for this research project “undertell,” in their sacred storytelling, whereas for some participants who “overwrite” or “overtell”, I need to cut the extraneous words and details which did not contribute to the main thrust of the story.

Slee uses semi-structured interviews in her research about female faith development and appreciates the way they allow the women to speak in their own words about the things that were important to them in a safe and unhindered way.²⁷ This rang true in my research as well. I did not know exactly where an interview would go, as that is determined by each participant, within the understood general framework. I approach each interview (and the writing of each poetic representation and response) as I would a spiritual direction session, with a time of silence and prayer. I aim to intentionally acknowledge the personhood of each participant, to be prayerfully attentive, and to commit myself to deep listening.

Some women need little prompting and speak easily and freely about their mothering experiences. P7 notes in the post-interview reflection that she was “a bit surprised” when she read the poetic analysis, realizing that she had been “more open, more honest than I have been about the past,” and expressed gratitude for creating a safe place to share. Often though, I pause and ask them to reflect further on a certain statement or encourage them to wonder more about an idea or story they tell.

Semi-structured interviews are somewhat risky and require a certain level of confidence on my part as the researcher that the participants have experienced God within the practice of mothering and know something about the character of God from

²⁷ Slee, *Women's Faith Development*, 54.

those experiences. My assumption is that they are experiencing God but I am open-ended as to the content of their experience. Each interview is met with anticipation, wonder, and the willingness to be surprised. The consistent themes throughout all the interviews are indeed a surprise.

Photo Elicitation

Sarah L. B. Dunlop's pioneering use of visual ethnography as a research method is advantageous for studying everyday religion in that photographs can draw out implicit knowledge and intuited responses.²⁸ Photos have the power to draw out memories and reflections that make it ideal for research regarding faith and religious lived practice.²⁹ *The Routledge Handbook of Research Methods in the Study of Religion* describes the photo elicitation method of data collection as working well within a semi-structured interview.³⁰ The archive method of photo solicitation means the researcher will provide the photographs, which will be of good quality, of some aesthetic value, and relatable in some way to mothers. I sourced my photographs from *Unsplash* and printed them in colour at a copy shop.³¹

The *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* advocates for photo elicitation as a visual research methodology, as the use of photographs can be used to generate deeper conversation, evoke "feelings, memories, and information," and allows for "triangulation between different information sources."³² Photo elicitation contributes to

²⁸ Dunlop, "Photo Elicitation," 565.

²⁹ Dunlop, "Photo Elicitation," 575.

³⁰ Dunlop, "Photo Elicitation," 567.

³¹ See Appendix E for Photo Images used for Photo Elicitation.

³² Glaw, "Visual Methodologies in Qualitative Research," 2, 3.

the “trustworthiness and rigor of the findings through member checking,” while adding “validity and depth, new opportunities, and new viewpoints.”³³ Lastly, in the *Annual Review of the Sociology of Religion*, photo elicitation is again used as a method to encourage religious narrative, as religious stories are “increasingly recognized as important sites for analysis.”³⁴

The photographs that evoke a response from the participants are noted during the interview.³⁵ Half of the women use five or more images while three women refer only to the first image and two women do not require the images at all for conversation prompts. The first image of a pregnant women’s belly is by far the most referred to image. Though this image is also the first image, it is apparent that pregnancy is a good starting point for the interviews. Participants comment that the images are useful reminders of the variety of mothering experiences (both positive and negative) and evoke deeper reflection.

For example, P7 notes that image #7 initially did not resonate but upon further reflection, she recognizes the compassion in the older woman’s eyes as something that all mothers long for. She expresses her desire to provide that sort of non-judgmental support to her own children who are mothers and fathers.

Also, image #5 of the smiling mother and crying toddlers resonate with four participants. This image prompts P8 to wonder if this is what God looks like sometimes when God’s children are upset and frustrated. As a mother, P8 does not view it as taking pleasure in the children’s turmoil but rather knows that this is something mothers do,

³³ Glaw, “Visual Methodologies in Qualitative Research,” 1, 3.

³⁴ Ammerman and Williams, “Speaking of Methods,” 117.

³⁵ See Appendix F for Participants’ Responses for Photo Images.

which is to be a stable force and calm presence in the midst of chaos. Therefore, her picture of God as One who smiles despite the chaos is not cruel or unsympathetic, but rather as One who understands that all shall be well, despite the current situation.

Some participants admit feeling nervous about the interview so the images also play a preparation role as they anticipate the interview. Based on the participants' response to the images, I would argue that photo elicitation is an appropriate and helpful research method for my research project.

Narration

Mason's learning methodology called narration, or the simple yet rigorous art of retelling, facilitates synthetic thinking, which is an active process of interpretation and articulation. This promotes a personal knowing and involves not only the accumulation of knowledge, but more importantly, makes meaning and builds connection. Walton also advocates for self-narration as "an innate human capacity that is beneficial, therapeutic and perhaps the original and archetypal theological form."³⁶ Participants narrate or tell their sacred stories from their own lived experience as a way of knowing God and knowing themselves in new and deeper ways. The interviews, and subsequent poetic representations based on the interviews, become the sacred tales of the participants.

New learnings are also revealed through the process of narration. For example, as P9 tells me the story of discovering how to pray when her child could not sleep, it is through the process of narration that she makes a connection. In her words, she "did not put all that together" until she told the story, saying that that "is not even what God

³⁶ Walton, *Writing Methods*, 91.

seems to be saying” but “this is what’s happening for sure.” Narrating her story allows for increased synthetic thinking that makes her more aware of what is actually taking place and seeing God revealed to her in a new way.

In the midst of another interview, P6 realizes as she speaks that she has “a mental block to think about God as mothering and nurturing” but can “totally experience Jesus and the Holy Spirit as mothering and nurturing.” She adds, “Isn’t that interesting?” She goes on to explain that God is distant and authoritative while there is a tenderness to Jesus and the Holy Spirit that feels very mothering. It is a new learning for her that she discovers as she narrates.

Data Collection

Participation recruitment is done through a single social media post on Facebook and Instagram.³⁷ Within approximately ten days, I receive more than 30 responses from interested women. Due to the enthusiastic response, I am able to choose a range of participants in regard to age, background, number of children, and geographical location. A Letter of Information and Consent is sent to each participant.³⁸ I conduct semi-structured interviews with ten participants who identify as women, as Christian, speak English, and are mothers (either pregnant, have natural born children, or adopted children).³⁹ There is one interview per participant, lasting about one hour each, with the possibility of a short, second interview for clarification if necessary. The photographs

³⁷ See Appendix A for Social Media Post for Recruitment.

³⁸ See Appendix C for Letter of Information and Consent.

³⁹ This is similar in sample size to Helen Collin’s research study, “Weaving Worship and Womb,” on women and worship in which 12 people participated. It also aligns with the number of participants that Jill Elizabeth Vogt included in her study, “This is My Story,” on storytelling and spiritual autobiographical writing in which ten people participated.

are mailed to the participants prior to the interview so they have them in hand for the interview. Online video interviews using the *Zoom* platform are used. Both audio and video recordings are preferred, and although the participants have the option of declining the use of video and only recording the audio; all participants agree to both audio and video recordings. The participants are sent a private email with the invitation to the interview. Online video interviews are recorded and then transferred to two external hard drives which were stored in a locked safe. Transcription is done by the researcher and saved in the encrypted external hard drives. A second backup copy of the interview and transcription are stored on a second encrypted external hard drive. Paper copies of the interview are stored in a locked safe.

The format of the findings from this research consist of raw data in terms of transcripts from the interviews, the chosen images, and the specific stories within the interviews. The data is collected and analyzed, resulting in poetic interpretations created from the participants' responses and my own responsive poetic interpretations.⁴⁰ These poetic interpretations and my poetic response are sent to the participants and they confirm that I have rightly understood them. A summary of the research is offered to the participants as a one page accessible and concise synopsis, with the option of reading the full dissertation. The research findings from the interviews will also be articulated in a form suitable for academic journals, conference presentations, or authored research.

⁴⁰ See Appendices F and G for the participants' poetic representations and the researcher's poetic responses.

Poetic Data Analysis

According to *SAGE Research Methods*, poetic analysis is a creative and artistic representation of qualitative research.⁴¹ It allows the researcher to pay attention to the language and emotion expressed by the participant and represent the data in a simplified and distilled manner. The advantage is that poetic analysis can capture the spirit of the participants' stories in an artful and invigorating way. In the *Wiley Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology*, the use of poetics is fitting for personal storytelling, as it allows for focused attention on key images and themes and for new expressions to emerge. Referring to Rebecca Chopp's work on testimony and metaphor, poetry and autobiography enable people "to envision life, be it personal, interpersonal or social in new ways."⁴² There is the opportunity to "fashion seemingly unrelated circumstances into artful narratives that give meaning to personal and social life."⁴³ Women may not quickly identify mothering as a spiritual practice by which they know God, and yet, through storytelling, they piece together parts of their life and ways of knowing to realize that their mothering experience has indeed allowed them to know God. Also, Slee uses poetic analysis in her study of female faith development and finds that "the poetic medium enables a condensed and accessible summary of content in the presentation of research findings to audiences who may not respond well to academic discourse."⁴⁴

The transcribed interviews are read multiple times to gain insight from both the overall content and smaller sections of specific phrases or sentences. This modified

⁴¹ McKenna-Buchanan, "Poetic Analysis," 1262.

⁴² Chopp, *Saving Work*, 43.

⁴³ Walton, "Poetics," 179.

⁴⁴ Slee, "Poetry as Feminist Research Methodology," 39.

method of data analysis involves nine stages and can be described as a *data generated thematic analysis* through a graduated series of reading, based on Slee's analysis method in her study of female faith development.⁴⁵

First, each interview is watched alongside the computer-generated verbatim transcript to note any discrepancies and corrections are made accordingly. Second, I read through the transcript and eliminate any vague or repetitive phrases, while retaining clear or rich references to a specific aspect of the experience. This results in a cleaner and more concise interview that can then be read multiple times again to gain insight from both the overall content and small sections of specific phrases or sentences.

For the third reading, I note emerging themes, and at times, gather various conversation fragments of the interview together which represent a common theme. I focus on key aspects of the story and appropriate the experience "more deeply in an imaginative and synthetic way" by grouping common themes and giving each grouping or section a title.⁴⁶ These titles are based on the theme represented.

For the fourth reading, I again listen for key themes and edit again so the poetic representations are clear and concise. The fifth reading results in about 8 to 10 poetic interpretations for each interview, formed almost exclusively from their own words. Occasionally, I have to revise verb tenses or substitute a noun for a pronoun for ease of reading. I also give each poetic interpretation a title. These poetic representations vary in length from seven lines to a full page. Sometimes the titles which I have given them earlier are edited for clarity and accuracy. By a deep listening to the texts themselves,

⁴⁵ Slee, *Women's Faith Development*, 58. An in-depth explanation of Slee's research analysis method is described in her chapter "Developing a Feminist Research Methodology," 43–61.

⁴⁶ Ruffing, *Uncovering Stories of Faith*, 78.

emerging themes within each interview are noted as I create poetic interpretations of each participant's experience using the actual words of the participants.

The sixth stage involves sharing the poetic representations with the participants and they either validate the findings or suggest revisions if the poetic interpretations do not fit with the participants' understanding of the experience. This allows me to ensure the findings are validated prior to sharing with a wider audience. A couple of small corrections are made. If necessary, a few minor edits are offered, like the age at which a participant was pregnant or who offered support during pregnancy (for example, one pastor rather than two pastors).

For the seventh stage of analysis, once the poetic interpretations are confirmed, as reflexive engagement and a "kind of rigorous interrogative process,"⁴⁷ I then respond to each participant with a poetic interpretation of my own. These responsive poetic interpretations are deeply appreciated by the participants and allow me to engage with awareness of my own interior movements, questions, and affirmations.

Then (eighth stage), in a closing email to the participants, I ask for their reflections on the entire experience of being accepted as research participant, the interview process, reading their own words in poetic form, and reading my response. These are read, recorded, and filed appropriately.

Then as a final step (ninth stage) of analysis, I re-read everything, from the verbatim transcript to each stage of the poetic interpretations, and my responsive poetic interpretations again. I make comments in the margins, noting overlapping themes and what pictures of God are woven through them all. Categorizing the stories according to

⁴⁷ Walton, *Writing Methods*, xvii.

the themes of God articulated allow for the overall theme to emerge, along with the four major themes of God.

Stage 1	Search for discrepancies
Stage 2	Pare out redundancies
Stage 3	Note emerging themes
Stage 4	Reiterate themes for poetic considerations
Stage 5	Draft poetic representations
Stage 6	Share/validate poetic representations
Stage 7	Write poetic response
Stage 8	Solicit participants' responses
Stage 9	Sift for themes about God

Table 1: Stages of Poetic Data Analysis

Slee warns that this approach to data analysis is time consuming and somewhat tedious but yields “an enormous richness of data.”⁴⁸ She is correct. Each interview results in about twenty to twenty-five pages of single-spaced data, which is then converted to about ten poetic interpretations, and includes a one-page single-spaced response. Due to the somewhat small number of participants (ten) and the fact that I am able to conduct all the interviews within a three-week window means that the data is fresh in my mind and themes are more easily visible. I can remember exact phrases from interviews and can begin noting common themes within the interviews and among the interviews. I also prepare to be fully present for each interview, the poetic representation

⁴⁸ Slee, *Women's Faith Development*, 60.

writing times, and the poetic response writing times, similar to the prayerful attention and deep listening involved in a spiritual direction session.

The poetic medium “enables a condensed and accessible summary of content” to “audiences who may not respond well to academic discourse and can permit an ongoing dialogue with research participants in a medium more accessible than scholarly writing.”⁴⁹ The research participants of this study appreciate recognizing their own words and style of storytelling, which contributes to the authenticity of the data results.⁵⁰ Poetic data analysis also allows for a type of conversational dialogue between the participants and myself as researcher, as I respond to their sacred tales.⁵¹ As P6 said:

Reading my own words in poetic form was so cool. I recognized all my own phrases and feelings. Your response though was the most meaningful. It was beautiful. Beautifully written, so meaningful, and therapeutic, in fact. So accurate and also brought me new realizations and learnings and new spiritual awareness. It felt nice sharing my experiences of mothering and then to see them in writing. It felt quite validating. I just loved how you captured the turning fear into faith aspect of my journey...this is still quite new for me so it was just a lovely realization and way to understand it through my words.

The participants are appreciative of their poetic interpretations. P9 describes the poetic interpretations and my poetic response as “a beautiful gift”. Another participant P8 writes:

I was thankful throughout to have the chance to share, thankful that God gave me strength and guided the process, thankful to have a compassionate, intelligent listener who is also a mother, and further on in the journey than myself. I felt heard and validated. I felt exhausted and empowered. Seeing my words in poetry felt like an embrace from heaven. It affirms the sacred, eternal value of motherhood that I hold in my soul but sometimes struggle to see and grasp in the day to day. Seeing my words and your response somehow offers a credibility and tangibility to our often invisible work as mothers.

⁴⁹ Slee, “Poetry as Feminist Research Methodology,” 38.

⁵⁰ See Appendix G for Poetic Representations.

⁵¹ See Appendix H for Poetic Responses.

P4 writes that in reading both her own words and my response, she felt “more solidified” in her ability to hear and know God deeply. Participant P2 acknowledges that the poetic representation and response helped her feel validated and “process feelings and verbalize them in a way I maybe have not before.”

Alienation, Awakenings, Relationality

In Slee’s research project on female faith development, she conducts an initial thematic analysis and identifies three major themes of alienation, awakenings, and relationality.⁵² While the primary focus of this dissertation is not on faith development, it is significant that the research aligns with Slee’s themes. As shown in the participants’ storytelling, women experience a sense of loss of their former selves and lives as they became mothers. As minute as diet limitations to the inability to enjoy previous hobbies to more significant losses of freedom and flexibility, participants speak of loss with a tone of grief and sometimes frustration. At the same time, mothering opens up new connections within themselves and their children, which leads to the second theme of awakenings. Participants testify to a new sense of power, achievement, pride in their bodies and being a woman, and ability to nurture new life. In terms of faith, there is an accompanying awakening to the reality of God in their lives and a personal knowing of God that emerges. This more intimate knowledge of God characterizes Slee’s third theme of relationality. God is closer, more involved, and there is a sense of greater and closer connection with the divine on behalf of the participants. The lived experience of mothering is an embodied practice of spirituality that facilitates a personal knowledge of

⁵² Slee, *Women’s Faith Development*, 81.

God. There is also an increased sense of awareness of and responsibility to their communities and the world at large. Slee's pattern of faith development as alienation, awakenings, and relationality rings true regarding the maternal theology within the narratives of the participants.

Ethical Considerations

McMaster Research Ethics Board (MREB) was required for this research project. Application to the Ethics Board was successful and ethics clearance was granted.⁵³ It is important to protect the integrity of the research and concern for the participants.

Limitations of Research Design

Due to the size of the research project, there is limited representation across social class and ethnicity. Since the ability to speak English was a screening question, the project prohibited non-English speakers from participating. Also, all participations identified as Protestant so other forms of spirituality are not represented. A more diverse audience could be integrated into a follow up or future study. All interviews were conducted via video call, due to the broad geographical locations of participants across Canada. This may have prevented potential participants from taking part if they lacked the necessary technological skills and equipment.

⁵³ See Appendix B for MREB Certificate of Ethics Clearance.

Transition to Research Findings

Let us now look at the research findings and discover what the participants know about God through the practice of mothering, beginning with an introduction of the participants and their life contexts. Then I will address the knowledge of God revealed in the research interviews and articulated more clearly in the poetic representations. The overarching theme of an expanded view of God will be described, followed by four major themes represented in the data.

CHAPTER 4: WHAT MOTHERS KNOW ABOUT GOD

Now that the narrative lens as a way to understand reality, God, and our human experience, and mothering as a spiritual practice has been established, the question is this: What do women know about God through the practice of mothering? Mothering is a unique embodied, distinctly feminine experience so I am curious to see the theology of God that emerges from their maternal narratives as I investigate the interview transcripts and poetic representations of their experience. Mothering as a spiritual practice gives women a bigger, more complex, more invitational, and more intriguing view of God. P1 describes mothering as “a way God shows us who God really is.”

The research project discovers an overarching theme through the participants’ sacred storytelling of an expanded picture of God. The four major theological themes from the interviews are the presence of God, participation with God, the vulnerability and suffering of God, and the nature of God’s love which is personal, maternal, unconditional, and includes women. The biblical narrative of the birth of Jesus and his mother Mary is a significant (and unexpected) common thread through many of the interviews.

Participants & Life Context

As the researcher, I intentionally chose diverse participation in terms of age, geographical location, age, and life experience. The research participants range in age

from the 30–34 age group to the 70–74 age group. There is one participant in the 30–34 age group, two in the 35–39 age group, three in the 40–44 age group, and one each in the 45–49, 55–59, 60–64, and 70–74 age groups. The youngest participant had recently given birth to a baby and her three children are preschool age and younger. Another participant is also new to mothering, having given birth the previous year. The oldest participant is a grandmother whose children are all in their 40s and grandchildren are approaching adulthood. The various decades are represented, along with the life stages of mothering. The different experiences of mothering an infant, toddlers, middle schoolers, teenagers, and adults are accounted for among the participants.

The geographical location of participants spans across Canada from Vancouver to the east coast. There is one participant from the Vancouver area, two from Alberta, one from northern Ontario, one from the Greater Toronto Area, and four from Atlantic Canada. Four live in major Canadian cities, three live in rural areas, one lives in a remote area, and one lives near a major center. Not only is there representation from five of the provinces, there is a variety of living contexts represented (city, small town, rural, and remote).

While most of the participants identify as Caucasian, there is some ethnic diversity represented. Seven out of the ten participants identify as Caucasian, two are European-born Canadians (Irish and Scottish), and one identifies as Brown South African Canadian. One participant is married to a Chinese Canadian and one is married to a Dutch immigrant.

Number of children of each mother range from 1 to 6, with the median being 3; while the age range of children range from 1 to 48.

While the socio-economic status of the participants would be middle to high, a range of life experiences is represented among the participants. One participant was diagnosed with cancer and underwent chemotherapy while mothering young children. Another participant lives in the north with her young children on an Indigenous reservation. Another participant experienced mothering in a developing country for several years. One participant is the mother to twins, which, as you might suspect, is another experience of mothering. Several suffered with infertility and miscarriage.

Various day to day mothering experiences are represented among the participants. Two are retired, four work full time, and one works part time. One participant is a fulltime home educator for her children and two are fulltime stay at home mothers. The different vocation contexts offer another layer of richness to the diversity of the study.

Some participants expressed an early desire to be a mother and to have children. To my surprise, though, half of the participants did not have an overwhelming desire to be a mother and some of those did not expect to be married and to have children. One woman said that she had never changed a diaper until she had her own baby. Some felt ambivalent about being a mother. However, once experiencing mothering, they unanimously appreciated the experience of mothering. One woman said that mothering was the thing that she was most proud of.

As stated previously, this research project focuses on theology within maternal narratives as expressed by participants from the free church tradition in Canada. Faith denominational background among the participants vary among the free church tradition. There is one participant attending a Brethren in Christ church, five participants attending a Baptist church, one attending a Christian Missionary and Alliance church,

and two participants attending churches with roots in the Plymouth Brethren movement. One participant is not currently part of a church, but previously attended a Brethren in Christ church. Two of the participants are from a Wesleyan background and one grew up in the Pentecostal charismatic tradition. Several either originate from or are currently attending a non-denominational church, often called a community church. These churches are often a mix of various faith traditions while adhering to the basic creeds of the Christian faith.¹

Overarching Theme: An Expansion of their View of God

Throughout all the interviews is an overarching theme of the expansion of the participants' picture of God. There is universal consensus among the ten participants that mothering has given them a bigger view of God. P3 speaks of gaining "a sense of how big God is, to be able to have orchestrated this all and made it all and love it all and to continue to want to be with us." Her words are reminiscent of Julian of Norwich and the hazelnut—that God created it, loved it, and sustained it.² In my poetic response to P4, I conclude by noting the irony of mothering being "a place to discover the bigness of God, especially since mothering is often within four small walls." The bigger picture of God that P4 has adopted as she practices mothering is not always comforting or exciting; but sometimes it is almost frightening. Again in my poetic response to P4, I affirm her sense of anticipation and caution:

This bigger picture of God is exciting
It makes me expectant and curious

¹ To protect the participants' anonymity, specific information regarding each participant cannot be shared. The confidentiality of each participant would be at risk if each participant was described individually. Thus, the life experience and particular contexts is shared in this format.

² Starr, *Julian of Norwich*, 13.

Also a little fearful—am I going down the wrong road? Is this ok?
 Even though we crave it, sometimes mystery is scary
 Sometimes the little boxes are much more comfortable than these wide open
 spaces
 And yet—our God is ineffable
 Of course, God is too much for us

P4 uses the words “much more multi-dimensional, more complex, more intriguing, a lot more mystery and questions” when describing God as known and experienced in mothering. P7 says she is learning “to just let God be God, realizing how small my picture of God has been and is.” She recalls a specific sacred tale:

I remember for one of the high school graduations
 Our daughter had gone to the church party
 And we took the boys to the dance
 I was terrified that we had done wrong—what we were doing?
 What we were we exposing our kids to?
 I mulled that over for days
 I can take you to the spot on the road
 A few days later
 When it became clear to me:
 Jesus went to where the people were
 Oh! Thank you, God!

Over the years of mothering, God burst out of the small boxes she had created for God and her picture of God became bigger, less legalistic, less black and white. P9 also recognizes that she has gotten to know God in a new way since becoming a mother. She says there is a “trusting God with this tiny little person” that is new because she has never had to rely on God so much before. The responsibility of “taking care of a tiny human was brand new and it felt weighty.” It is as if the practice of mothering naturally facilitated a new understanding of God.

Throughout the interviews, four major themes within the overarching theme of an expanded view of God emerge throughout the interviews. The participants speak of the

presence of God, divine participation, the vulnerability of God, and the unconditional and deep love of God.

First Major Theme: Presence of God

The sense that God was with each research participant through the experience of mothering is a dominant theme throughout all the interviews. As P2 explains, mothering taught her experientially that “God is not just there for the big miracle moments, but that God is literally there moment by moment, breath by breath.” God’s presence is always associated with love, though the experience of God’s presence (and love) is not always the same.

As Joy, Rest, Comfort, Protection, Solidarity

The presence of God is often described as positive, joyous, and comforting experiences. P2 uses such phrases as “so much sweetness and so much pure joy.” P8 recalls discovering she is pregnant and looking out her living room window, watching the trees sway in the wind. It is as if God is with her and celebrating alongside her. The presence of God is joyous.

When I ask P4 what she thinks God might say to her right now, she pauses and gets a little teary. Then she smiles up at me and says

I think God would say—*I’m with you for the journey*
 I think He would say—*you can sleep!*
We’ll take care of that tomorrow
 There are so many things I worry about
 Sometimes I think God invites me to rest
 That He is here today and that He is in it for the journey
 God is here for the whole process

For P4, God is present with her for “the long haul,” as she puts it. God is not an occasional presence, but a steady, enduring presence, which translates into an invitation to rest. The urgency and anxiety that accompanies mothering is somehow mitigated in the comforting presence of God.

In another story regarding the birth of her daughter, P4 remembers being anxious for the birth to happen and doing all the things to make this baby come (eating spicy foods, walking for miles, and so on). Then during prayer, it is as if God says to her, “Yes, I just need you to rest and then we will get this baby coming.” She describes the birth (though it was the time of the Covid-19 pandemic and there were multiple births that night) as having a special peace about it. She talks about feeling present and having “a peace and awareness and energy that was really strange.” She names it as the presence of God and “definitely this sense of power beyond my own, and rest.” In this sacred tale, the presence of God means rest and peace, even though the experience itself (childbirth) is dramatic.

The presence of God to P9 is experienced as a sense of protection. Protective may usually be seen as a masculine quality and most associated with God as Father. However, P9 associates protection with God as Mother. This is reminiscent of the Old Testament metaphor of God as a mother bear, highlighting a mother’s protective instincts (Hos 13:8). P9 says she is most drawn to God as a mother in terms of protection and comfort:

I feel like God has been with me the way you would ask your mom to come and be with you
 You know how you want your mom when you’re sick
 You want your mom when you’re tired
 I need God when I’m exhausted and tired or sick
 At the end of my rope
 Asking God for help feels like a call-your-mom kind of request

P2 tells the story of one of her young boys being seriously ill with malaria and transferring him to the hospital in the middle of the night. She vividly names the experience of the presence of God as a sense of “with-ness.” She recalls the experience as this:

I remember the rawness of crying out to God in that moment
 There’s a depth of anguish that a mother feels
 There’s no other relationship that can explain that kind of love and desperation
 I felt like God met me in that truly horrible moment
 In all its rawness and anguish

P2 describes the presence of God as the “goodness of God in a truly terrible place”. She hesitates to name it as sweetness but recognizes there is something good about it. P3 also speaks of “clinging to this hope that there is a Mother God out there who loves this child and loves me and that She will be there for us in whatever comes up.” There is a sense of hopeful desperation that God is present—with her and her children, especially considering the terrible things that could happen while her husband is away or when emergency services cannot respond.

P4 refers to the presence of God in emotionally neutral terms at one point—using the image of the vine and the branches from John 15:5. God is present, but she is mindful of her “connection to that life force, this sense of abiding, like communion, constant mindfulness and surrender, walking with God.” It reminds me of Augustine in his *Confessions* when he says, “You were with me, but I wasn’t with you.”³ The presence of God is experienced as a sense of connection and solidarity—that God is beside them and very much alongside them in this experience.

³ Ruden, ed., *Confessions*, 312.

Being With, Not Begging

Knowing that God is present changes the way in which the participants relate to God. Instead of begging for certain things to happen, evidenced in the “please, please, please prayers”, there is a settledness in being with God, even through uncertainty and not knowing. P1 realizes that God had been with her all along the way, even when she did not demonstrate a deep faith. As P1 expressed in her interview

I used to pray
Please, please, please, Lord
 Those were my prayers
 All fear and worry.

But through the experience of mothering, she develops a confidence in God, that God is present and working. She describes it as God saying to her, “leave it with me. Keep trusting.” P1 clarifies that it is not confidence in the child or the situation, but that trust is required to remain connected with God, in order to be present with God.

P3 brilliantly articulates her paradigm shift from God-as-wizard to God-with-us. She grew up with God as “a genie or a wish-fulfiller.” It was her move to a remote community that prompted her to question the idea of God as her personal wizard who would make all things right and good for her and her family. She realized that everyone in her community was praying for protection and so why did she expect God to favour her? She was careful to point out that she believes in a God who sometimes intervenes, prevents suffering, and protects people from hardship; but, in her words, “Lots of times, God doesn’t do that. God is not protecting people in the way that I think people deserve protection.” In a humorous story related to a bed bug infestation, P3 is aware of her desire for God-as-wizard:

I wish I could believe in the God that some of our relatives believe in
 Like—*In the name of Jesus, I command the bed bugs to leave!*

*You have no place here!
You cannot stay!*

She sometimes wishes that God worked that way as it would be very helpful. While she still asks God for help all the time, she says that she has shifted “from asking God to do things for us to asking God to be with us.”

Second Major Theme: Participation with God

Knowing God extends beyond knowing and experiencing God as present in their lives. There is a sense of divine participation that echoes through all the interviews, that God is not only present but desires participation with them. Seven out of the ten women refer specifically to Image 1 of a pregnant belly, and all the participants talk about the experience of pregnancy. A resounding theme is the connection between pregnancy and divine participation. P2 said that pregnancy made her feel like she was “truly in partnership with God,” that they were “somehow doing something together, me and the Lord.” P1 describes co-creation with God as a “kindness” and mothering as “a co-existence” and “co-labouring” with God:

God brings us in—He loves us so much
God says *you’re a part of this*
Work with me in this
This is how I will populate the earth
There are many other ways God could have done it
He could just say the word and I’d pop out a baby
But no—

P4 remembers going into labour one morning and being reminded in a marvelous way of

This strange intersection
That I have this invitation for participation in something divine
That the Creator is creating and bringing into being this human
But somehow I get to participate

She recognizes her husband's participation and her body's knowing of how to put a baby together but testifies that it would not have been possible without God. She describes it as the "most supernatural experience" she ever had. She names the labour and birthing experience as feeling very much seen and known by God and of realizing her position within "the grand scheme," referring to the meta-narrative of Scripture. Pregnancy and birthing as ways of participating with God is a strong theme that came up repeatedly.

Stories of participating with God in terms of solving problems or figuring things out is expressed by multiple participants. P9's sacred tale of learning how to nap with her newborn daughter is a beautiful illustration of partnering with God. She articulates a shift from fear to divine participation. She experienced fear and worry when her baby girl was born and prayed many frantic prayers for her to sleep: "My prayers were like please, God, please, please, please let her go in her bed. Over and over again." She says God helped her change that prayer to "I want to do whatever it is that she needs me to do." Once she started praying that way, "everything changed." She uses words like "cozy," "relaxed," and "happy" to describe nap time. She believes that God gave her that prayer because God desired to "work through this" with her and that it would be a better approach than her "please, please, please" prayers. P9 says she felt God gave her a word—"with." She felt understood and that God was present with her. This then opened the door to divine participation. In her words

It felt like a partnership with God
 It felt like God was saying—*I'm with you—and I want to give you everything you need*
Ask me, ask this way
It's going to be different in your heart if you ask me this way
Because I hear
 Then it was like—*oh! We're in this together*
 I'm actually not alone
 I have felt the presence of God very strongly in other ways before but

Maybe this sounds so weird—but I felt like God was partnering with me in the nap
That it was like—*ok, God, it's nap time! Let's do this!*

P8's story of caring for her children during cancer treatments is another picture of divine participation. She says that she struggled not being able to be at her children's sporting activities or special events. She grieved that she could not be physically present. P8 credits God for the idea that even though she could not be physically present, she could pray: "God has definitely laid it on my heart that I can be present through prayer." Prayer was the gift that God gave her to allow her to be spiritually present with those she loved, when being physically present was not an option.

In another story, during a difficult and anxious post-partum period, P8 recalls feeling trapped in a dark room, trying to settle a crying baby. The overwhelming responsibility of mothering, combined with the lack of sleep and hormone imbalance, caused obsessive anxiety for her as a young mother. She remembers really struggling mentally in that dark place:

God brought to mind in a very powerful way this idea
This verse—of His power being made perfect in my weakness
So I wrote that verse on a little card and put it next to the rocking chair

It is a tangible example for her of divine participation, although she recognizes it is not an equal partnership. She contributes her weakness and inadequacy while God contributes strength and power. P10, too, calls her partnership with God as a "bad partnership," due to the imbalanced nature of the relationship. She says, "I need God's strength to get through this" but realizing that God does not "benefit" in the same way from her partnership.

Divine participation is difficult to describe, yet P5 uses the helpful words "gliding along in the love of God" as she worked and mothered her children. In my poetic

response to her, I refer to the poem “The Avowel” by Denise Levertov. Often our spiritual lives are characterized by strenuous effort and working so hard as we splash about (wildly sometimes), trying to keep our heads above water. Despite our best efforts, though, we start to sink. However, Levertov suggests that floating on our backs in the ocean of God’s grace is how we stay afloat:

As swimmers dare
to lie face to the sky
and water bears them,
as hawks rest upon air
and air sustains them,
so would I learn to attain
freefall, and float
into Creator Spirit’s deep embrace,
knowing no effort earns
that all-surrounding grace.⁴

Divine participation as resting in the grace and love of God requires deep trust and confidence that God is sustaining and holding us. It depends on a sort of rest, confident that God is present and loves us. Similarly, Simone Weil defines prayer as attention, turning our heads and hearts towards God. She does not characterize prayer with muscular effort but more the kind of loving effort by which a fiancée accepts her lover.⁵ While there is still plenty of intention and attention, there is a sense of rest, of floating on one’s back versus splashing about. This is the sort of “gliding along in the love of God” that P5 testifies.

In P5’s sacred tale about the stress regarding her son and his motorcycle, she describes it as “one of the most dramatic spiritual experiences” she ever had. She remembers one night her son was out on his motorcycle and she was overcome with

⁴ Levertov, *Selected Poems*, 142.

⁵ Weil, *Waiting for God*, 126.

worry. She got out of bed and cried out to God, “I can’t live like this anymore, Lord! You’ve got to do something.” In response, God seemed to reach down and release the fear. Even though her son was still not home, and she did not know for certain if he was safe, she was able to sleep without worry or anxiety. In her words, P5 says “it didn’t mean that my son was going to be physically fine, it was like—it’s going to be ok because God is with me.” God’s presence to her during this experience seems like floating on her back rather than splashing about.

P8 also describes her morning devotion time with God as being her “sweetest time” and a “healing balm.” This is when she feels “most peaceful.” Due to the trauma of cancer and treatment, sometimes it is overwhelming to be with people so participation with God means time spent together with God in prayer and conversation. It is a contemplative time, not an active time, of participating with God that is marked with peace and rest.

Third Major Theme: Vulnerability & Suffering of God

The suffering involved in mothering is clearly expressed by the participants. The intensity of mothering and the indefatigable nature of children pushes women to their physical, emotional, and spiritual limits. There is a vulnerability and lack of control that is particular to mothering. Although mothering requires everything women have in terms of resources, the end result is beyond their control. As P2 laments,

There is constant surrender
 We are not in control
 We have to constantly hold these kids with open hands
 Maybe this is unique about mothering—because we don’t have a sense of ownership
 Even though biologically our child is ours
 They’re not really

There is a sense of coming to one's end and having nowhere to go. P2 describes herself as a "pretty faith-filled person" who has not experienced a lot of fear and anxiety, and yet she has never experienced fear as she has in motherhood. She described this fear and vulnerability as the suffering of motherhood.

P10 comments that the sacrifices and suffering involved in mothering begin on a small-scale during pregnancy, like the inconvenience of not being allowed to eat non-pasteurized cheese and limiting physical activity. Especially as someone who is typically very active, the new reality of sharing her physical body with another human being was a significant sacrifice. P10 says the suffering of pregnancy was unlike anything she had endured and that it revealed her need for something supernatural. Pregnancy as the introduction to mothering created a new deeper dependence on God for her.

P3 also voices this new familiarity with vulnerability, expressed as fear and anxiety, as a mother. She says, "I wasn't a highly anxious person before becoming a mother, not having control would not have been a stressor." However, the practice of mothering opened her up to a sense of exposure, vulnerability, and the inevitableness of suffering and sorrow. In her words

To be a mother is to suffer
It's the vulnerability
Opening yourself to suffering in a whole new way

The suffering of mothering is implicitly and explicitly connected to the vulnerability of suffering of God. For P3, the image of the Black Madonna resonates as one who has suffered, recognizing that women of colour have suffered injustice in a disproportionate way: "Because who has suffered most in the world? Women of colour. And to think that God is with them, that God could look like them." God as Mother is a particularly poignant understanding of God for P3 because it connects God with humanity and the

Earth in an intimate way. Embodiment and physicality matter to God as Mother, as compared with God as Father—who is seen as “detached from our bodies, high up in heaven, as a ruler, at a distance, maybe angry” (P3).

Six out of the ten women refer specifically to the nativity story of Jesus as a baby and Mary as his mother. The understanding of the vulnerability of Christ as an infant increases in significance with the experience of motherhood. P2 says that it was becoming a mother that prompted her to think about God becoming a helpless baby:

Having babies made the Christmas story come alive for me
 The miracle that God who created everything
 Became a helpless baby...
 I never thought of the helplessness of Christ until I had babies
 It makes it even more of a mystery and a miracle to me.

The suffering involved in mothering is a connection point to Jesus and the suffering he endured. It also includes Mary, the mother of Jesus, and the suffering that she experienced as mother.

Suffering is an aspect of divine participation, as expressed by P4 when she says: “but God allows me to participate again in the suffering and selflessness and sacrifice,” referring to the realities of mothering and caring for small children. She mentions the sacrifices of giving up her own comfort and pleasure, along with desires for further education. The experience of mothering reinforces for P3 that God is with those who suffer: “God is with us, God is the One who enters in and joins us in our suffering.”

P3 comments in her post-interview reflection that not only is God present and active, but that God suffers alongside us: “Something was consolidated in my thinking about a Mother God and how She suffers with humanity.” The theme of God as One who is vulnerable and suffers is an aspect of God that is evident throughout the interviews.

Fourth Major Theme: Unconditional and Depth of Love of God

The final major theme that emerges from the maternal narratives is the nature of God's love. The unconditionality and largeness (depth and width) of God's love becomes more personal and more real through the practice of mothering for the participants.

Mothering as a Window into God's Love

The mothering experience is a place where women experience unconditional and deep love for their children, and at the same time, catch a glimpse of the unconditional and deep love of God. Os Guinness claims that "there is no higher, richer, and more gloriously universal signal of transcendence than love."⁶ Therefore, the love that a mother has for her child can be named as a transcendent signal or a revelation of God. For example, P4 says that she recognizes her own love for her children is not based on their behavior or performance. Even when they are disobedient, she still loves them: "There is a sense of abiding love for them that is ongoing, that is not going anywhere." As she speaks, she peels back a theological layer of performance ("that God wants me to earn my place with Him") to a deeper, truer layer of unconditional love and grace ("But no—God is in this for me, to carry me along the way.") She joyfully testifies that God loves her with "a steady sort of love" and it is not a "frivolous loosey-goosey-kind of holding on" that God extends to her. The word "steadiness" is used by P4 and P6 to describe the unconditional love of God. As women and mothers, there is familiarity with steadfast love. Anne Elliot from *Persuasion* claims that "all the privilege I claim for my own sex (it is not a very enviable one, you need not covet it) is that of loving longest,

⁶ Guinness, *Signals of Transcendence*, 103.

when existence or when hope is gone.”⁷ Loving long and steady is the love that mothers experience for their own children but is also a glimpse of the nature of divine love for humanity.

P5 also comments on the unconditional love she feels for her children, knowing that the mother-child bond of love is not equal or mutual like a spousal relationship. In a sense, a mother does not receive from the child in the same way she gives, particularly with infants. Before becoming a mother, she heard people talk about a mother’s love being greater than any other sort of love and she did not really believe it. When she became a mother, she says she was shocked at the unconditional love she felt for her baby. She did not think it was possible. Later in the interview, she says that “having children makes you able to see things a little bit from God’s perspective.” In the practice of mothering, she caught a glimpse of the love of God. It is the unconditional nature of love which involves the freedom to accept or reject. The freedom to choose (whether that is in regard to us with God’s love or a child with a parent’s love”) opens the door to rejection. As a mother, P5 realizes that rejection will naturally and inevitably occur, whether that is “not eating peas at dinner or something bigger.” Part of that rejection is a natural aspect of children growing up and mothering helps women like P5 understand “what it is like to create a thinking person and allow them the freedom to choose what they want.” The unconditionality of love requires the possibility of rejection.

Prompted by the image of the smiling mother and the crying children (Image #5), P6 reflects on her own story from the past weekend. Her two girls had Covid-19 and cried all weekend; while she, as mother, smiled amidst all the chaos. In her words, “I

⁷ Austen, *Persuasion*, 221.

gather them onto my lap and let them cry and bawl and I can sit there with a smile on my face.” As she talks, she appreciates the image as a picture of God, likening the smiling mother to God who loves and smiles amidst our fussing. She notes the steadiness of God: “He’s unchangeable, unflappable, steady, doesn’t change, dependable, reliable. All those things. Always full of love and grace. He can handle anything we’re going through.” Mothering is giving P6 this image of God as a steady presence because she has experienced it herself as a mother. Just like her, God is not easily flustered. Julian Norwich, a spiritual mother from centuries ago, phrased it as “all shall be well, all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.”⁸

In her interview, P10 clearly expresses that newborn babies do not offer much to a new mother. She says, “they can’t sweep my kitchen floor, they can’t earn money, they are 100% dependent on me, they are 100% just taking.” Yet, her next line is “I absolutely love them! I treasure my children so much!” She argues that her love for her newborn is not contingent on how much value they add to the household or how much they sleep through the night. Her love for her children is not based on their abilities or their performance. P10 makes a direct link to her understanding of God’s love for her: “To think that God looks at me the same way.” She says it is like God reminding her that God’s love for her does not fade away or decrease when she is performing poorly. In her words, mothering “gives you a window into how much God loves you.”

⁸ Starr, *Julian of Norwich*, 67.

God's Love as Personal

Because she was able to get pregnant so quickly despite her age, P9 wonders if God knew she was getting older, knew that she was a worrier, and did not want her to wait. She sees her easy pregnancy as a grace of God—undeserved, even unasked for, pure gift. Mothering involves experiencing a new depth of love for P9 as well, as she notes that

Since becoming a mom
I've understood a depth of love that I did not know
It helps me understand how much God loves me

It is a love that invites participation, as she recognizes that God does want to be the “unseen silent partner” in her life, just as she desires love and participation with her daughter.

When it was time for P9 to put her daughter in day care, she prayed that her young girl would feel “safe, secure, and loved.” It was prayer that she did not tell anyone, except her husband. When they were trying out a daycare for a few days, she told the staff that she was so grateful for their attentive care and efforts to make her little girl feel at home. The staff member said, “We just want her to feel safe, secure, and loved.” P9 says that she started to cry, asking “You don’t get much more of a direct answer to prayer than that, do you?” This sacred tale reminds P9 that God hears her, is with her, and that God loves their little girl so much. She is confident that “God is going before us.” The personal and particular nature of the love of God for her is evident through her sacred tale.

When P8 was first diagnosed with cancer, she remembers feeling so overwhelmed and sad one night. She tucked her little boy into bed one night and was reading a chapter

from a storybook Bible. At one point, the sadness overtook her, and she was unable to keep reading. Without a word, her little boy picked up the book and read to her. Several years later, she returns to that sacred tale as a reminder of the unconditional love of God. When she could not perform at all and had only tears to offer, God gifted her unexpectedly. She realizes that she did not “earn” that moment with God, but it was generously offered to her by the God who loves her personally.

God’s Love as Maternal

Being mothered by God did not resonate for P6, but being mothered by Jesus and the Holy Spirit did speak to her. She recalls a time when her young girl was in hospital and undergoing surgery and she felt “very much sustained and held up by the Holy Spirit of Jesus.” Despite knowing how things would go, she “had peace, felt sheltered, nurtured, cared for.” Then again, when her father passed during Covid-19 and when her husband would work night shift, P6 describes being loved by God as “somehow gathered up in the arms of Jesus.” During the interview, she describes how she still gathers her girls up in her arms though they are not little girls anymore. This is how she felt being loved and mothered by Jesus:

It was like a big image of Jesus outside my house with these big, outstretched arms
I’ve got you
You do not have to fear
Nothing is going to get you
I live in you, around you, I’m a part of you
You are abiding in me and nothing can get you
 It is like that eternal image of a mother caring for her child
 I’ve never thought of this before
 The mothering side of the Lord
 But it’s huge

P8 also notes being mothered or shepherded by Jesus. Due to the commonality of suffering, she feels a closeness to Jesus. She admits that this may seem like a Sunday School answer, but she says, “I really connect with Jesus as One who has suffered and knows despair.” Psalm 23 is an important Scripture to P8 which she reads daily as it portrays Jesus as a tender and powerful shepherd.

P10 is resistant to the idea of being mothered by God. She struggles with the idea of God being portrayed as female. She doesn’t “have a problem when the Bible speaks of God as a father,” but she “never sees Him in a mother role.” The image of God as shepherd, though, was meaningful, aligning with P8’s experience of being shepherded by Jesus. As a mom of five children, she prefers the image of a shepherd caring for his flock. It is interesting to note that in practice she views God in a maternal way but did not articulate it that way.

God’s Love as Unconditional

The sense of being unconditionally and deeply loved by God is not necessarily a warm, comfortable feeling. For P3, she mourns her feelings of unworthiness as she thinks about God watching her as she yells at her kids for not doing things as quickly as she would like. At first, she imagines God accusing her in an angry and disappointed way, then she says, “Then, I have a sense that God loves me, God has compassion on me, God is with me.” The love of God is not dependent on her performance as a mother and while she is very much aware of her maternal failings, she has grown in confidence that the love of God is unconditional.

As P9 reflects on the joy of mothering her young daughter, I ask her what God thinks of her. She pauses, tears come to her eyes, and she says, “I think God might be

proud of me.” She then goes on to speak of the delight her daughter gives her and how she has “become that person who after I’ve spent the whole day with her and I’ve put her to bed and I’m tired, I pull out my phone and look at pictures and videos of her because I just can’t get enough of her.” She connects her own delight in her daughter to the reality that God is delighting in her.

P6’s sacred tale of discovering the unconditional love of God is profoundly shaping for her. She grew up with a fearful approach to God, never certain that she was behaving as she should or measuring up to God’s expectations. The experience of infertility and a second trimester miscarriage had left her feeling “doomed when it came to having children.” Coupled with the view of a distant and exacting God, her relationship to God especially approaching pregnancy was marked with fear. However, it is the experience of pregnancy and becoming a mother to twin girls that transforms her fear into faith. Having grown up with the “God-will-bless-you-if-you-have-enough-faith” mentality, P6 testifies that mothering introduces her to a totally different understanding of God. She says, “I actually really struggled with faith [during pregnancy], I had so much fear and yet God blessed me anyways.” She recognizes that the grace of these two baby girls was “grace upon grace”, “gift upon gift” that had nothing to do with her. In fact, it is in the midst of great fear (not faith) that God loves her so generously. P6 says that the experiential knowledge of the unconditional love of God that is not performance based is more than biblical knowledge or a feeling. It is a new reality for her that has spilled over to other areas of her life, like “conspiracy theories and pandemic craziness.”

P8 also recognizes that mothering has shifted her to “a healthier balance of grace and work.” She realizes that she was being harder on herself than God was and that God

is helping her be gentler with herself and those around her. She says, “it is so much more gracious.”

In her early years of mothering, P7 was afraid of God, thinking she had to perform to please him. She says the last 20 years have been “life altering” as she has learned and experienced the unconditional love of God. During the interview, she recalls watching her new baby granddaughter, held by the new father’s hands, and gazing into his eyes. She remembers thinking, “That’s how I want to be able to look at God, like a child,” feeling the pride and love of God, just as her granddaughter was absorbing the pride and love of her father. As a mother, this is what P7 longs for most for her children – that “they would know that God loves them. Bottom line. That they would know and experience God’s love,” confident that personal knowledge and experience of the unconditional love of God opens the door to freedom and an abundant life.

God’s Love for Women

P3 reflects that mothering connected her to her faith in an embodied way. Previous to becoming a mother, she admits that she was very disconnected from her body but “as a mother, it becomes impossible not to feel about your body. There’s lots of choices how you feel about your body, but the reality is you are so much more connected to your body now.” Previous to her mothering experience, she admits that she had a profound sense of God being anti-human:

Becoming a mother and feeling so vulnerable and having such compassion
There’s a sense that God really, really is with me
Through the anxiety and significant insomnia
Through physical issues and medical issues
Pregnancy, childbirth
Recognizing that God is with me
God gets this

God is glorified through pregnancy and childbirth somehow
 God created our bodies and these are beautiful things
 I grew up believing that our bodies were a kind of shameful thing
 Pregnancy, menstruation, puberty, sex, pregnancy, childbirth, nakedness
 Was all kind of shameful
 Where did I get that from?

She rejects that all now and concludes that “God absolutely loves women.”

There was also a new respect for women, due to the Incarnation and the fact that God could have chosen a different way to enter our world. But instead, God chose a woman and chose to be dependent on a woman’s body in a most vulnerable way. P4 wonders why, as she says “that seems really surprising to me. I don’t have answers for that.” She goes on to wonder at the fact that it was a woman who would have the most intimate relationship with God that any human will ever have:

That’s weird to say out loud
 That no human
 Let alone any woman
 Would have the kind of relationship that Mary had with God
 So women can participate with the divine
 I don’t know how to articulate that
 But I’d love to meditate more on that

P6 also expresses a new appreciation for the beauty and power of the female body as she became a mother. She marvels that “God gave us everything we need to keep these babies alive” and “how God created our bodies to be sustaining.” One of her memorable lines from the interview, referring to the power of breastfeeding, is “my breasts were their kryptonite!” P6 exhibits an enthusiastic appreciation and almost astonishment for the female body. Especially with two girls to raise, she is mindful of her desire to show them how important they are to God. She admits

I think I always felt like the inferior sex
 Until I became a mother
 Then I was like—pftttt!

I'll never think that again!

That the “most important job on the planet” (to be fruitful and multiply) is given to women is a profound realization for P6 that results in a new confidence and appreciation of being created female by God.

As a teenager, P10 wanted to be a boy. She dressed like a boy and “despised having a female body.” Her mother insisted that she was created in God’s image and never entertained the idea that she had been created wrong. It was not until she held her baby in her arms and nursed her baby that she realized what a privilege it was to be a girl. She describes being made female as “an incredible gift.” There was such fascination and pride associated for breastfeeding as she watched them “get fatter and fatter,” knowing that it was her maternal body responsible for their growth. Now when her own girls complain about puberty, she says, “Yes, but you get to have babies.” The gift and privilege of the maternal body was recognized for P10 as she nursed her babies.

Transition to a Philosophy of Birth and a Natal Christology

As suggested by the themes of the theology of God that arise from the maternal narratives, along with a focus on pregnancy, the power of the birthing experience, and the references to natal Christ, let us consider a philosophy of birth and a natal Christology. Birth is a common and significant theme through the maternal narratives, as the participants reflect on their own birthing experiences and the birth of Christ in the biblical narrative. What is important about birth? In Chapter 5, I will explore the work of Hannah Arendt and Jennifer Banks in terms of a philosophy of birth and articulate a natal Christology that reveals the presence, love, and vulnerability of God.

CHAPTER 5: A PHILOSOPHY OF BIRTH AND A NATAL CHRISTOLOGY

Have we ignored birth? We are encouraged to live as though we might die tomorrow or to keep *memento mori* in the forefront of our minds.¹ In our focus on death, have we failed to pay attention to birth? A philosophy of birth affirms us as natal creatures with the capacity to act. It urges us to consider the gift of our existence and reminds us of the agency we have.

If birth is important, then surely the birth of Jesus must be something we are to ponder. Not only did the participants reflect on their own birthing experiences, but the participants express a resonance with the biblical nativity story. Several participants ask the question “Why?” Is there something important about the Incarnation beginning as a birth? God could have come anyway, but God chose to enter this world as an infant through a woman’s body. What is important about a natal Christology?

Because we are most familiar with Christ as an adult, a natal Christology encourages us to view God in fresh ways as we consider Christ as an infant. We realize that the Incarnate Christ came as a baby intentionally to reveal the unique nature of God, to affirm the human experience, to bring men and women together, and to instruct our approach to suffering.

The Incarnation is our visible introduction to God—and to our surprise, God appears as a baby. More than half of the participants refer directly to the nativity story in

¹ *Memento mori* is a Latin phrase, meaning “remember you will die.”

the biblical narrative as being particularly meaningful to them as mothers. There is something about Mary and baby Jesus that resonates with mothers. P7 reflects on the nativity story, remembering holding her own baby one Christmas and pondering things in her heart about Mary and Jesus and then herself and her little baby. She says “I just felt a different feeling about the Christmas story and Mary” once she herself had become a mother.

P8 says that it was her first Christmas with her little girl that she felt very connected to Mary; that God spoke to her and made the nativity narrative come alive. She calls it a “sacred” experience. She admits that there are many different characters in the Bible that she is drawn to, but that “first Christmas with my baby girl—it was Mary.” P8 wonders if sacrifice is the connection between mothering and the nativity story. The Triune God suffered and sacrificed in the Incarnation and, even as a young mother, she knew that mothering would also involve suffering.

P10 reflects on the nativity story, focusing on Mary’s mothering experience. She notes Mary’s response and that she seems to be “at peace with the fact that she was housing the Savior.” She wonders if Mary might have been tempted to hide her pregnancy or question the angelic visit, but the biblical narrative does not communicate that. Instead, there is a confidence and awe in her participation with the Divine.

P2 says that having babies made the Christmas story come alive for her. She had never thought of the “helplessness of Christ” until she had babies. She says, “it makes it even more of a mystery and a miracle to me that God gave up heaven to be helpless and in total need of his mom and dad.” She remembers holding her own babies, “covered in poop or vomit,” and experiencing their helplessness. It is Christ’s vulnerability as an infant that stands out to her.

A Philosophy of Birth According to Hannah Arendt and Jennifer Banks

A senior executive editor at Yale University Press, Jennifer Banks became intrigued with birth in the last decade or so. The birth of her own children and then discovering the word “natality” in a book proposal propelled her on her own journey towards a philosophy of birth. Her investigations led her to Hannah Arendt, a student of German philosopher Martin Heidegger. Heidegger believed that we ought to orient our lives around death. Banks describes Heidegger as arguing that “because our lives are finite and our deaths are unavoidable, an authentic human life is oriented toward death’s horizon.”² Roman Stoic philosopher Seneca speaks of “death’s omnipresence in our lives.”³ Seneca instructs us to “study death always. It takes an entire lifetime to learn how to die.”⁴ Banks argues that “death has been humanity’s central defining experience, its deepest existential theme, more authoritative somehow than birth, and certainly more final.”⁵ Of course, there is truth in those admonishments. Banks agrees that we should wrestle with our mortality as everyone will surely die. However, she asks the question: what about birth?

The Life of Hannah Arendt

Hannah Arendt grew up in Germany in the early twentieth century. She attended the University of Berlin and then went on to study with Heidegger at the University of Marburg. As Heidegger’s student, she fell in love with her charismatic professor, her

² Banks, *Natality*, 32.

³ Banks, “Reckoning with Birth,” 2023.

⁴ Banks, “Reckoning with Birth,” 2023.

⁵ Banks, “Reckoning with Birth,” 2023.

“hidden king.”⁶ A few years later, Heidegger cut off the love affair and she was heartbroken. Arendt went on to focus her philosophical work on birth, rather than death. (Banks mentions that “some critics have seen natality as Arendt’s rebellion against her former professor, her Nazi love—her mordant way of flipping Heidegger the philosophic bird.”⁷) Whether it was revengefully intended or not, we will never know; regardless, the idea of birth began to shape Arendt’s approach to life in a new way. She argues that “birth and the miracle of our creative beginnings are what indelibly shape us and prove our capacity to creatively act in the world.”⁸

The Trial of Eichmann

It is the trial of a World War II war criminal that prompts further considerations regarding birth for Arendt. In 1960, SS Lt. Colonel Adolf Eichmann was on trial in Israel for war crimes regarding the Holocaust. Eichmann had “played a key role in the Nazis ‘Final Solution’, organizing the transport of millions of Jewish men, women, and children from Nazi-created ghettos in central and eastern Europe to the killing centers at Auschwitz-Birkenau and elsewhere.”⁹ Arendt volunteers to cover the story as a reporter for *The New Yorker*. When she sees him in the courtroom, she realizes that he is not what she expected. Instead of a vicious and barbaric killer, she sees an ordinary man, whose “key distinguishing characteristic was a truly remarkable degree of ‘thoughtlessness,’” meaning that “he lacked the capacity to view things from another person’s point of view or to engage in any independent thought or judgement of his

⁶ Arendt, “Martin Heidegger at Eighty,” 1971.

⁷ Banks, *Natality*, 32.

⁸ Banks, *Natality*, 32.

⁹ Villa, *Hannah Arendt*, 12.

own.”¹⁰ In her mind, he had forgotten that he had been born and had the ability to choose.

Birth and the Capacity to Act

Arendt is most well known for her work on totalitarianism. In her study of war camps, she observes that the most significant accomplishment of the captors was to extinguish the prisoner’s ability to act and choose:

Through forced labor, continual hunger, and the constant fear of beatings or shootings that required neither justification nor excuse, the prisoners in the camps were deprived not only of their rights and liberties but—ultimately—of their capacity to act or even behave in unpredictable ways, a capacity Arendt deems to be ‘distinctively human.’¹¹

Arendt explains in her own words that the peculiar evil of totalitarianism is this:

Making human beings as human beings as superfluous (not using them as a means to an end, which leaves their essence as humans untouched and impinges only on their human dignity; rather, making them superfluous as human beings). This happens as soon as all unpredictability—which, in human beings is the equivalent of spontaneity—is eliminated.¹²

Arendt went on to study political freedom, political action, and revolution; she would later identify as a political theorist rather than a philosopher.¹³ However, please pay attention that it was the notion of birth that initially formed the foundation of Arendt’s philosophy, and then led to political theory. According to Banks, birth was “consistently there in her work, an enduring preoccupation and an integral, undeniable, under-recognized theme.”¹⁴ Because we are natal creatures, we have the capacity to act.

¹⁰ Villa, *Hannah Arendt*, 13.

¹¹ Villa, *Hannah Arendt*, 19.

¹² Arendt and Jaspers, *Correspondence: 1926–1969*, 166.

¹³ Villa, *Hannah Arendt*, 123.

¹⁴ Banks, *Nativity*, 39.

The Term *Natality*

In fact, Arendt first coins the term *natality* after World War II.¹⁵ To her, birth is seen as philosophically crucial. She says, “once called into existence, human life cannot turn into nothingness.”¹⁶ Arendt argues in her book *The Human Condition* that we “are not born in order to die but in order to begin.”¹⁷ Rather than living as mortal creatures who are going to die (although that is true), we are to remember that we are natal creatures who are destined to live with human bodies on this earth.¹⁸ Because we are born, we have the capacity for action and for new beginnings. The understanding that birth meant the capacity for action meant that natality became a central theme for political action for Arendt. Arendt writes that the new “always appears in the guise of a miracle” and that “with each birth something uniquely new comes into the world.”¹⁹ Birth meant new beginnings for Arendt, because “the birth of a human was no mere recycling of the biological materials that had existed before him, but a miraculous unprecedented beginning.”²⁰ Birth meant something new and possibility.

The Impact of a Philosophy of Birth

Although Arendt was not a practicing religious person, she refers to the biblical story of the angels’ joyful announcement of good news that a child had been born in Bethlehem. It is not Christ particularly that brings faith and hope for Arendt, but the child that refers to each of us. The good news is not that “we’ll be whisked away to heaven when we die,

¹⁵ Banks, *Natality*, 33.

¹⁶ Arendt, *Love and Saint Augustine*, 48.

¹⁷ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 178.

¹⁸ Banks, *Natality*, 43.

¹⁹ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 178.

²⁰ Banks, *Natality*, 46.

but that creation is here within us, waiting for us to begin again in this haphazard, hazardous ‘festival of life.’ We are each a potential savior.”²¹ Every human being has been born and thus, has the capacity to choose, to act, to begin. There is a sense of possibility with birth. There is a reverence for existence, that someone is alive. Along with the respect for life beginning is a love for the world or *amor mundi*, as Arendt puts it.²² There is a responsibility to care for the world and for each other.

Birth creates an opportunity for new beginnings.²³ Especially poignant is that Banks is writing her book about birth during the Covid-19 pandemic when the threat of death hung heavy. Yet even (or perhaps especially) in dark times, birth reminds us that we are natal creatures in a mortal world. We are born as an affirmative and powerful nod to life and the ability to act. We are full of possibility and we have a responsibility to care for each other. Our existence is not to be taken lightly. As mothers know, pregnancy and early childhood are marked with vulnerability and wonder. The fact that we are here is remarkable. I remember holding my baby boy in the air, just seconds after he emerged from his previous home of nine months, and crying, “You’re here. You’re really here!” If we remember that we are natal beings, does that encourage us towards a sense of purpose? An appreciation for the human existence? And perhaps even prompt us towards caring for one another? Arendt never lost the “shocked wonder at the miracle of Being”²⁴ and even into her old age, “she continued to insist on her own natality, her

²¹ Banks, *Natality*, 48–49.

²² Banks, *Natality*, 48.

²³ Banks provides a fascinating look at how Hannah Arendt, Friedrich Nietzsche, Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Shelley, Sojourner Truth, Adrienne Rich, and Toni Morrison view birth. Complete with life stories and insights as to how birth was philosophically formational for them, this is an interesting read. Banks, *Natality*, 201.

²⁴ Arendt, *Human Condition*, 302.

ability to begin again.”²⁵ Banks says it takes “an entire lifetime to learn birth’s lessons, to reflect on its full capacities, to understand what it means to be natal, created, creating creatures.”²⁶

I came across my mother’s medical records a few years ago. As I read through the pages which detailed multiple pregnancies, interventions (some necessary and some perhaps not), miscarriages, medical complications, and difficult recoveries, I felt a distinct appreciation for the gift of life that she had given me. It was due to her willingness to grow me inside her womb and keep me alive during those tender young years when I simply would not have survived without her. My life had cost her. As a mother of five, I had thought about the gift of life that I had given to my children, but I had never considered the gift of life I had been given. I had been born. I felt both a reverent gratitude and a sense of responsibility to live my life well.

A Natal Christology

Prior to the research interviews, I knew that the Incarnation was key for understanding our sacred tales. I was not prepared, however, for the emphasis that the participants would place on the biblical nativity story. There are a number of biblical stories that mothers can possibly relate to. For instance, the story of Hannah highlights faithfulness as she prays for a son and then gives him back to God as a young boy (I Sam 1:9–28). I wondered if Hagar’s difficult mothering experience (Gen 21) or Jochebed’s wit and forward thinking as the mother of Moses may strike a chord with mothers (Exod 2).

²⁵ Banks, *Nativity*, 206.

²⁶ Banks, “Mortality and Nativity in the Pandemic.”

These were not the stories they spoke of. I wondered if women might view their mothering experience as primarily spiritual formation. However, they did not.

Mothers know the power of birth and all the participants name their birthing experiences as powerful, spiritually significant experiences. It is no surprise. After all, mothers are intimately familiar with natality. So, birth is an important philosophical view, as proposed by Banks and Arendt and as personally experienced and expressed by the research participants; but is it important that God came as a baby? Banks argues that “the crucifix would overshadow the manger as the central symbol of liturgical worship, with Christ’s death and resurrection accruing more theological significance in most communities than Mary’s miraculous birthing.”²⁷ In terms of theological attention, the cross and resurrection have garnered much more time and space in research and academia. Though the Nativity plays a major role in the church calendar and is the most celebrated religious holiday, most academic work regarding Christ has been concerned with the adulthood of Jesus, primarily his crucifixion and resurrection. What about a natal Christology?

The Vulnerability of a Natal Christology

Even though the biblical narrative of the Incarnation is familiar, the question begs to be asked: Why did Jesus come as an infant? Elizabeth O’Donnell Gandolfo reminds us that the “liberating good news of divine incarnation does not begin with Jesus’ public ministry as an adult. Rather, it begins with a socially high-risk pregnancy; with a humble, messy, and painful birth; and with the natal body of a squalling, dependent, and

²⁷ Banks, “Reckoning with Birth.”

vulnerable infant.”²⁸ Gandolfo argues that a natal Christology emphasizes the vulnerability of human life, the nativity as divine redemption, and that Christ’s vulnerability can lead us to practices of peace. It is her theme of vulnerability that is most significant for this project. The Incarnation allows an invulnerable and only divine God to participate in human life and love. Divine love is, by definition, not human and is “limited to the realm of invulnerability divinity and thus precludes values and powers that are only available in the vulnerable realm of humanity.”²⁹

How does God break through? It is the Incarnation, where the “invulnerability of divine love becomes vulnerable human flesh.”³⁰ As she says, “Jesus responds to the problem of human vulnerability with living proof of the possibility of bringing together the divine with the human, the infinite with the finite, the impassible with the passible, the immutable with the mutable, the invulnerable with the vulnerable.”³¹ As I refer to the Incarnation as the Great Connection, it is this event in the biblical narrative that opens the door for divinity and humanity to be with each other and to participate together. This is a powerful act of love. As Gandolfo says, “what is much more impressive is the power of God to become that which God is not—human and thus vulnerable.”³² In the natal Christ, God becomes vulnerable so that we may become invulnerable and gain access to the divine love and life that exists within the God-head. The Incarnation opens the possibility for humans to become what we are not, which is divine and invulnerable, and we experience “the fullness of divine love at work for the redemption of the cosmos.”³³

²⁸ Gandolfo, “A Truly Human Incarnation,” 382.

²⁹ Gandolfo, “A Truly Human Incarnation,” 388.

³⁰ Gandolfo, “A Truly Human Incarnation,” 388.

³¹ Gandolfo, “A Truly Human Incarnation,” 388.

³² Gandolfo, “A Truly Human Incarnation,” 388.

³³ Gandolfo, *Power and Vulnerability of Love*, 214.

It is in the Incarnation that “the invulnerability of divine love becomes vulnerable human flesh and the vulnerability of human flesh manifests the invulnerability of divine love.”³⁴

The Incarnation can also be seen as a second-Creation or a second-Birth. Yet, this creation is not from nothing and interacts in the most intimate way with humanity:

The bloodiness of this second Genesis makes the life of Mary’s child possible—a re-creation not from nothing, but from everything, from the universal stuff of life. But the blood-borne origins of the Incarnation remind us that the invulnerable nature of divine love becomes not only possible, but also vulnerable in the crimson waters of Mary’s womb.³⁵

The Incarnation does not begin with the arrival of Jesus as a fully formed adult in public ministry or leads directly to his death on the cross: “Rather, it begins with the pre-and postnatal body of a vulnerable and dependent infant.”³⁶ God’s power is displayed most vividly in the manger: “The baby Jesus is a quintessential icon of divine power-in-vulnerability.”³⁷

Grace Jantzen is a feminist scholar who also steers our attention from death to birth, in hopes that natality can “function as a transformative suggestion, a therapeutic symbol to destabilize the masculinist necrophilic imaginary.”³⁸ She also draws on Arendt’s philosophy of birth, recognizing that our natality is embodied possibility. However, Gandolfo cautions that Jantzen does not consider vulnerability alongside possibility. As mothers know, “being born is risky business.”³⁹ I would agree that vulnerability is clearly a part of natality, and necessary for a natal Christology.

³⁴ Gandolfo, *Power and Vulnerability of Love*, 214.

³⁵ Gandolfo, “A Truly Human Incarnation,” 383.

³⁶ Gandolfo, “A Truly Human Incarnation,” 391.

³⁷ Gandolfo, “A Truly Human Incarnation,” 393.

³⁸ Jantzen, *Becoming Divine*, 129.

³⁹ Gandolfo, “A Truly Human Incarnation,” 385.

Participant P6 confesses that “since becoming a mother, the Christmas story completely revolves around Jesus as a baby.” She admits that every year she is surprised that God decided to come as a baby. The vulnerability of becoming a human infant is astounding to her and yet she clearly links the vulnerability of God to salvation: “Without God coming as a human baby, we don’t have salvation. Hmmmm! That’s full stop!”

Born of a Woman

There is something more to consider. Jesus could have magically appeared as a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths lying on Mary and Joseph’s doorstep or by the local community well where several women would have discovered him in the morning as they carried their buckets to be filled. They would have been able to sort out a suitable plan for an orphan child. But no—the Incarnation involves the consent and participation of a maternal physical body. Why did Jesus enter the world through the body of a woman?

A Birth Like No Other

I propose that the Incarnation involves the body of a woman because this is a birth like no other, it includes both sexes, and it elevates what is considered lowly. First, the birth of the Incarnate Christ is like no other birth. Why did Jesus come as a male infant? Is God male and thus, Jesus must be male? Jesus did not come as male because that is God’s preference in terms of sex and God is not male. Peeler claims that “God does not prefer males because God the Father is not male and God the Son is male like no

other.”⁴⁰ If God is male, then how are women made in the image of God? If God is masculine and feminine, then God cannot be male. It is right that God is both described in masculine and feminine terms throughout Scripture. God is both Father and Mother.⁴¹ Moltmann names God as a motherly Father and Kathryn Tanner uses the phrase “a Father with a womb;” both are effective ways to know God.⁴² Therefore, God is neither male or female, but Jesus is born as a male human child. Since Jesus could not be born female through the body of a man, he was born male through the body of a woman like no other birth.

While God is not male, Peeler argues that it is the Incarnation that makes it fitting for Jesus to address God as Father. She goes on to say that Jesus did not address God as Mother because he already has a mother.⁴³ I appreciate Peeler’s encouragement to address God as Father—not because God is male, or more masculine than feminine; but because God sent his Son to be born of a woman, and thus, is Father.

Includes Both Sexes

The Incarnation includes the body of a woman as the only way to include both sexes in this great act of revelation and salvation. Mary’s pregnancy in the nativity story affirms God as One who honours women and does not favour men. The conception of Jesus is like no other male, for it involves a Divine God and the body of a woman. The

⁴⁰ Peeler, *Women and the Gender of God*, 4.

⁴¹ For readers’ interest, the picture book *Mother God* by Teresa Kim Pecinovsky and beautifully illustrated by Khoa Le is a thoughtful and provocative depiction of the feminine descriptions of God from Scripture—as a singer of lullabies, seamstress, baker, mother hen, mother bear, and so on.

⁴² Peeler, *Women and the Gender of God*, 100–1.

⁴³ Peeler also refers to Cynthia Bourgeault who says, “As Jesus becomes ‘son’, so, inevitably, does God become ‘father.’ And Mary becomes ‘mother’,” quoting from *The Holy Trinity and the Law of Three: Recovering the Radical Truth at the Heart of Christianity*. Boston: Shambhala, 2013, page 157. (*Women and the Gender of God*, 115).

Incarnation includes both sexes and does so with respect towards women. The birth of the male Jesus depends upon a maternal body, as this brings together both men and women. As Marga says, “no other kind of human could have played the role that Mary plays in attaching humans to God. No other human except a mother could give them access to God’s grace. Only with the historicity and physicality of Mary’s humanity could Christ’s own humanity be guaranteed.”⁴⁴

God’s actions towards Mary reveals that God values and empowers women.⁴⁵ It is important to notice the exchange between Angel Gabriel (representing the Divine) and Mary. The interaction between the Divine and Mary at the time of the Annunciation is not between “one strong and one weak, one forceful male and one forced female, but between one God and one human woman, who both act for her honour from the place of strength.”⁴⁶ Poet Levertov highlights the respect with which God extends to Mary in her poem “Annunciation”:

The engendering Spirit
did not enter her without consent.
God waited.

She was free
to accept or to refuse, choice
integral to humanness.⁴⁷

Another poet Irene Zimmerman frames God’s respect for Mary this way:

Your world hung in the balance of her yes or no.
Yet, ‘She must feel absolutely free,’ You said,
And chose with gentle sensitivity not to go
Yourself—to send a messenger instead.⁴⁸

⁴⁴ Marga, *In the Image of Her*, 84.

⁴⁵ Peeler, *Women and the Gender of God*, 4.

⁴⁶ Peeler, *Women and the Gender of God*, 66.

⁴⁷ Levertov, *Selected Poems*, 162.

⁴⁸ Zimmerman, *Incarnational Humanism*, 27.

This was not a matter of force, for the desire was for cooperation, not coercion. It is interesting to note that though Mary was situated in a patriarchal culture, she did not seek permission from the men in her life (her father and her fiancé Joseph), which would have been culturally appropriate and expected. In fact, she did not even consult with them. This was a matter between her as a human woman and God. Take notice that it was not only Mary's womb that was invited into participation with God. Mary's entire body and who she was as a person is important to God. This is illustrated later in the nativity story when Mary sings her prophetic words in what we know as the Magnificat (Luke 1:46-55). Mary is mother, as well as prophet and worship leader. American Black poet Drew Jackson captures this beautifully in his poem titled "That Girl Can Sing!":

I mean, she can sang!
 She has a voice
 that can shatter shackles.
 Her tune is no soothing lullaby;
 it thunders down
 through the arena of time.
*Sing, Mary! Sing!*⁴⁹

Both men and women are brought together in the Incarnation, as Jesus is incarnated as male through a woman's body in a way like no other man. Marga celebrates that the Incarnation "pushes back against long-standing sentiments of disgust and confusion regarding the female body" and it "reaffirms the mother's central and esteemed role in the core tenet of Christian faith: the Incarnation."⁵⁰

⁴⁹ This is a beautiful collection of poems based on Luke chapters 1 to 8, in which Jackson focusses on the theme of liberation. A fresh and powerful way to hear the stories of Scripture. (*God Speaks Through Wombs*, 17).

⁵⁰ Marga, *In the Image of Her*, 66.

Sayers concludes her book “Are Women Human?” by directing the reader’s attention to Christ himself, illustrating beautifully Christ’s interaction with and affirmation of women. She says

perhaps it is no wonder that the women were first at the Cradle and last at the Cross. They had never known a man like this Man—there never has been such another. A prophet and teacher who never nagged at them, never flattered or coaxed or patronised; who never made arch jokes about them, never treated them either as ‘The women, God help us!’ or ‘The ladies, God bless them!’; who rebuked without querulousness and praised without condescension; who took their questions and arguments seriously; who never mapped out their sphere for them, never urged them to be feminine or jeered at them for being female; who had no awe to grind and no uneasy male dignity to defend; who took them as he found them and was completely unself-conscious. There is no act, no sermon, no parable in the whole Gospel that borrows its pungency from female perversity; nobody could guess from the words and deeds of Jesus that there was anything “funny” about woman’s nature.⁵¹

Revelation of the Nature of God

Thirdly, the body of a woman is an integral part of the Incarnation because it is yet another revelation of the nature of God. This is who God is. God is most interested in lifting up what has been put down. Women (and their bodies) through history have been ignored, disregarded, and even vilified. Ancient Greek and Roman culture saw the “female body as a defective form of humanity” and “the male as the truest and most well-formed human being.”⁵² Christianity did not have a lasting impact on changing these perceptions. Referring back to Guite’s poem “Descent”⁵³, the ancient gods did not have a favorable opinion of humanity in general. Certainly the feminine acts of birthing and nursing were considered unclean and even shameful. The good news that Jesus

⁵¹ Sayers, *Are Women Human?* 68–69.

⁵² Marga, *In the Image of Her*, 45.

⁵³ See Chapter 1, page 45–46.

arrived through a woman's body would have been startling and confounding for ancient ears. (Marga suggests that this led to Marcionism which denied the physical and bodily birth of Jesus, viewing the Incarnation in a docetic manner.⁵⁴)

As the nativity narrative unfolds, the priestly male of voice of Zechariah is dramatically silenced, demonstrating God's intentional choice to amplify the voice of two women, Elizabeth and Mary (Luke 1:5–24, 39–56). This must have seemed strange to first century listeners. As Kelley Nikondeha says, the choice to focus on women was “more than just a rhetorical choice—it was a subversive reversal.”⁵⁵ Men were accustomed to speaking and being heard, and yet in the nativity narrative, something different occurs. Reflecting on Zechariah's post-birth song at Jesus' circumcision, Nikondeha says:

Those three months of the mothers in spirit-breathed conversation and song under Zechariah's roof were an intimate part of his transformation. In his silence, he had listened to them. He had allowed their holy curiosity to provoke his own. Their wrestling with generational wisdom shaped him in ways he had never before experienced in the company of the temple priests. These women energized his faith with their own. Perhaps he was the first be mothered by their advent goodness.⁵⁶

At the time of Jesus' birth, the culturally acceptable belief was that all things related to the female body were corrupt and filthy. Centuries later, Jonathon Edwards echoes a similar thought in that “Mary's womb represented the lowest and most shameful places to which God could go.”⁵⁷ What the world considers shameful, God lifts up. Just as God chose the younger son, rather the older son or the young child to feed a crowd, God is in

⁵⁴ Docetism is the belief that Jesus only seemed to be human and that his human body was an illusion but not true reality.

⁵⁵ Nikondeha, *First Advent in Palestine*, 81.

⁵⁶ Nikondeha, *First Advent in Palestine*, 72.

⁵⁷ Marga, *In the Image of Her*, 62.

the habit of burning down our caste systems. In the Incarnation, it is the maternal body that is lifted up: “God has deemed the female body—the impure, bleeding female body—worthy to hold the most sacred of all things, the very body of God.”⁵⁸ Of course. This is who God is and what God does.

Suffering Accompanies Love

A natal Christology speaks of vulnerability and the possibility of suffering, “it is also the condition for the powerful possibilities of connection, meaning, and virtue.”⁵⁹ Gandolfo argues that “a nearly exclusive focus on the divinity present in the agency of an adult male fails to drive home the utter contingency and inevitability of vulnerability faced by divine love in the Incarnation.”⁶⁰ The relationality and the nature of unconditional love means the involvement of suffering. It is part of our theological anthropology. As mothers we are tempted to control our children in such a way that they will not have to experience suffering. Even with our best efforts, we soon realize that that is impossible. Our children will suffer and so will we. A natal Christology is necessary in that through the nativity narrative we see God (or Mother-Sophia as Gandolfo says) who “does not remain distant from or indifferent to our plight, but rather enters into it in loving, suffering solidarity with it. Perhaps it is for this reason, then—the vulnerability of divinity—that God became a baby.”⁶¹

Christ did not enter this world to eradicate all possibility of suffering here and now but to “show us the way suffering accompanies love in this world, and the way love

⁵⁸ Peeler, *Women and the Gender of God*, 61.

⁵⁹ Gandolfo, “A Truly Human Incarnation,” 387.

⁶⁰ Gandolfo, “A Truly Human Incarnation,” 386.

⁶¹ Gandolfo, “Breastfeeding as Contemplative Practice,” 179.

survives such suffering as love, rather than turning into violence.”⁶² Carnes says “God wants us to survive suffering without being defeated by it.”⁶³ In the Incarnation, we see Christ’s willingness to suffer and to accompany us in our suffering. To love is to risk suffering.

Pregnancy as Welcoming the Stranger

Just as a natal Christology illustrates Mary’s hospitality towards the Divine, pregnancy speaks of the hospitality extended towards the stranger, being both the unborn child and to God. The unborn child is indeed stranger to the mother, despite the intimate relationship. There is a sense of not knowing this person who is distinctly a different person, even a stranger. In her memoir *All My Knotted-Up Life*, Beth Moore reflects on not knowing the person who lived within her body for nine months:

It’s shocking what a stranger a newborn can be to the very woman who grew and birthed it. You thought he or she would be completely recognizable, utterly familiar and known by you. A piece of you. The same as you. But you know when you see them—or at least I knew when I saw her—that a much bigger marvel had taken place. The child that grew inside of you and was nourished, protected, and hidden by you is an individual, cut apart from you now, unique from you, moving free of you, seeing the world in a different way from you.⁶⁴

It is the act of pregnancy that allows mothers to offer an intimate and embodied experience of hospitality.

In a recent conversation with a friend who is about to give birth for the first time, she too expressed the sense of unknowing as to the identity of the person growing inside her body.⁶⁵ It is a bewildering experience. I remember my first pregnancy and knowing

⁶² Carnes, *Motherhood*, 65.

⁶³ Carnes, *Motherhood*, 65.

⁶⁴ Moore, *All My Knotted-Up Life*, 146–47.

⁶⁵ A month after that conversation, I am happy to report that the person is Eleanor and she is beautiful.

intellectually that I would give birth to a human infant, but I could not imagine who this stranger might be.⁶⁶

Carnes' memoir *Motherhood: A Confession*, written in response to Augustine's *Confessions*, focuses on the rebirth that occurs within her as she gives birth to her daughter. In the first half of the book, she addresses her child and then she turns her attention and conversation to God in the second half. She wonders, "In Christ, God came, not as a fertile woman, graced with a life-giving body, but as a babe, like you, who required a mother's body."⁶⁷ In many ways, it would make sense that God would come as a mother in order to teach us and care for us. A mother gives life and tends to her children. She is powerful, worthy of imitation, and to be listened to. However, God is incarnated as an infant. This seems counter-intuitive. It is a paradox and yet "it is a central mystery of Christianity that God in the newborn Christ is at once both helpless and all-powerful. God the mother of all creation came as the neediest creature within it, a baby."⁶⁸ As Carnes reflects on the birth of her daughter, she realizes that God came to her in a new way in her pregnancy:

You came as Christ to me, not because you were divine or sinless but because like Christ, you came to me as a stranger in need, offering grace. The gift of your needy presence taught me to receive you, my own vulnerable stranger, so that by that practice of hospitality, I might learn to receive Christ. With you pressing against the walls of my belly, finding no room to grow, I learned to make space for God. And so through you, my small creation, I found and became more like my uncontainable Creator. In your dependent existence, God came to me in a new way.⁶⁹

⁶⁶ I was delighted to meet the stranger – Alexandria - who lived in such close proximity to me for 9 months and to get to know her these past 25 years.

⁶⁷ Carnes, *Motherhood*, 16.

⁶⁸ Carnes, *Motherhood*, 16.

⁶⁹ Carnes, *Motherhood*, 14–15.

A pregnant mother offers hospitality to the stranger, the Divine. Carnes wonders if “Martha’s imitation of divine hospitality is perverse because it leaves no room for God’s actual presence”⁷⁰ (Luke 10:38–42). Although Martha is preparing for Jesus, she misses the presence of God which is right in front of her. There is something about Mary’s hospitality that makes room for the presence of God.

In the experience of pregnancy, God continues to come to women as one who is looking for shelter, food, and comfort. In the parable of the sheep and the goats, Jesus says that Christ comes to us in the form a stranger:

‘For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.’ Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?’ The King will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me’ (Matt 15:35–40).

Is this not the mothering experience? Providing housing and nourishment for a stranger? Mothers understand what it means to welcome the stranger in a real and embodied way. Reading the Matthew passage as a woman who has experienced pregnancy casts an entirely different light on welcoming the stranger—and welcoming God. In conversation with her daughter, Carnes says,

There is something else you have in common with Christ. Christ, too, came into the world by a womb. The God who made heaven and earth came as one of the least of these, harbored in the body of the woman who became God’s mother. There is no room which can contain God, but God entered the uterus, the smallest room anyone ever inhabits. Mary’s hospitable yes drew the uncontainable God into the world, and her swollen belly became the first glimpse of Christ, the human-God.⁷¹

⁷⁰ Carnes, *Motherhood*, 27.

⁷¹ Carnes, *Motherhood*, 15–16.

Pregnancy is an embodied, intimate, costly form of hospitality. Participants note the suffering involved in extending hospitality to their children. Although hospitality can be understood figuratively, at the same time, it is quite literal. The experience of pregnancy and mothering is very much the embodied practice of making space for the other, the least of these—Christ himself.

An Endorsement of the Human Experience

It is important to note here that self-denial has historically been put on women to deal with the sin of pride. Traditionally, self-sacrifice has been seen as the most noble virtue for women (to counteract the sin of pride); however, Carnes says

Theologies that emphasize pride as the cardinal sin and self-sacrificial love as the redemptive path pretend a false universality, feminists have pointed out. Women in a patriarchal world are often too quick to give themselves up, too prone to suffer abuse, too ready to withdraw. The traditional descriptions of sin and redemption thus not only fail to address women's situation; they can also maintain women's oppression . . . With this insight, feminist theology began to take shape, attending to the lives of women as sources for theological reflection.⁷²

Feminist theologians argue that the call to self-denial is appropriate for privileged men, but not so for women and other marginalized persons. Elizabeth Johnson argues that women need to reject the sexism that is implicit in our history and theology. Using the language of conversion, Johnson says that “women’s awakening to their own human worth can be interpreted at the same time as a new experience of God.”⁷³ A positive moral view of the female body as women “claim full ownership of their human identity as *imago Dei* and *imago Christi*” which is the “center of gravity for feminist discourse

⁷² Carnes, *Motherhood*, 62.

⁷³ Johnson, *She Who Is*, 64.

about the mystery of God.”⁷⁴ Therefore, conversion (which Johnson defines as the “turning around of heart and mind that sets life in a new direction”) for women means speaking up, taking space, and becoming the people that God created them to be.⁷⁵

Narrative can play an important role in terms of visibility and empowerment of women.

So what role does self-denial play for women? For humanity? Are we to endorse the human experience or be suspicious of it? Even deny it? I would argue that the sin of pride is inherently human, whether one is man or woman; but considering the historic differences in power and privilege between men and women, one can see that the message of self-denial has the potential to oppress women and “stunt their spiritual growth as whole and healthy selves.”⁷⁶ Only after a full embrace of our humanity as women made in the image of God is the call to self-denial appropriate and honourable.

It is necessary and wise for women to first embrace their human experience and their maternal experiences as a gift from God and then deal with the sin of pride. It is remembering that we have been born, that we are esteemed by God, and that our maternal bodies are good and can be a holy site of encountering God. Just as God works in and through our minds and hearts, so God works in and through our bodies. Janet Martin Soskice warns against a disembodied approach to spirituality, and drawing from Julian of Norwich, does not pit the physical against the spiritual. Referring to Julian of Norwich, Soskice sees that God “is at work in both our substantial and our sensual natures, and Christ pre-eminently in the latter.”⁷⁷ Soskice sees the Incarnation as not simply “a rescue operation”: “The moment God becomes clothed in human flesh in the

⁷⁴ Johnson, *She Who Is*, 64.

⁷⁵ Johnson, *She Who Is*, 64.

⁷⁶ Gandolfo, “Breastfeeding as Contemplative Practice,” 167.

⁷⁷ Soskice, *Kindness of God*, 149.

womb of Mary marks a triumphant unfolding of God's plan of love."⁷⁸ Why would we want to escape our physical bodies if God chose to become one of us? Soskice believes that the "human being is glorious, not lowly, because Christ is glorious; and something similar seems to be true of the human body."⁷⁹

Participants tell their stories of pregnancy, giving birth, and mothering as divine affirmations of the human body, and particularly the female body. P8 remembers the day she found out she was pregnant with her daughter. She was sitting her living room in their little condominium and she was so full of joy. She remembers looking out the window and it was a windy day. To her, the trees seemed to be in full praise to God and nature seemed to be joining in her joy. She describes it as the "presence of joy." There is a sense of God delighting in the new human life that has become reality. Human life is received with joy and gladness—by the new mother P8 and by God.

P4 says that Advent has been an especially captivating time for her in recent years. Referring to John 1:14 (the Word became flesh and dwelt among us), she marvels at the Incarnation. "Why would Jesus come as a baby?" she asks, wondering at the "real multi-faceted humanity of Jesus," particularly as an infant. She says that during pregnancy, she made a shift in how she viewed God from being "very stoic, maybe detached, disconnected" to God coming "very close," making her think that "God is not afraid of my emotions, that He is not put off by my personality, or just humanity in general." Similar to what P3 expressed is this idea that the Incarnation reveals a God who is not anti-human, but a God who loves humanity and desires for us to be fully alive to the human experience. In fact, the human experience is God's gift to us. P4 says that

⁷⁸ Soskice, *Kindness of God*, 150.

⁷⁹ Soskice, *Kindness of God*, 148.

God chose to become human and in that act is an affirmation of the human experience: “It’s like— I created you! I intentionally made you and gave you this human body, all those things and emotions.” In terms of her conception of God, she articulates it as a shift from viewing God as “stingy” to “much more mystery to chew on”.

Transition to a Maternally Informed Understanding of the Mission of the Church

How does the theology within the maternal narratives, along with a focus on birth and a natal Christology, impact the mission of the church? In this final chapter, I argue that these lead us to a maternally informed understanding of the mission of the church. This maternally informed understanding orients us as the church towards God as the One who gives birth, challenges us to a fierce maternal missional love for the world marked by compassion, and strengthens us to be tenderly vulnerable despite the inevitable suffering.

CHAPTER 6: A MATERNALLY INFORMED UNDERSTANDING OF THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH

If the spiritual practice of mothering is helpful to consider in terms of knowing God, then women know something about God that is important for the church body to consider. Understanding the nature of God influences the way we act in the world and carry out the mission of God as we mirror the God we know. Due to women's biology, their ability to give birth, and their mothering experience, women have special knowledge, to borrow Sayer's phrase, that is not only helpful, but essential for the church to hear and to consider. The church has lived with the deficit of women's voices, particularly regarding everyday spiritual practices like mothering, for too long. It has been to our detriment as the body of Christ that we have neglected and even silenced one half of the church. We are not learning from the wisdom of each other and we are not sharpening each other in our knowledge of God and one another. We are simply and even dangerously missing out. Something needs to change if we desire to fully experience and participate with God in a redemptive way. For women to speak and be a part of the conversation is one thing. Listening to that voice is another. It is our responsibility together to ensure that women are encouraged to speak and, then, men and women have a responsibility to listen and learn from the knowledge of God expressed by these maternal voices.

The theology within the maternal narratives tells us that our God is present, wants participation, loves unconditionally and is vulnerable. How does this impact the church? I propose that the theology of God within the maternal narratives, along with a philosophy of birth and a natal Christology, helps shape our understanding of the mission of the church in three ways. First, it places God as the primary divine impetus for the church's way of being and acting. It is God who gives birth to new life, not us. Second, the church's fierce maternal love for the world is to be marked by compassion. Lastly, due to the unconditionality of our love for the world, the church is tenderly vulnerable, and, thus, suffering is inevitable.

It is God who Gives Birth to New Life

As is evident in the maternal narratives, women recognize the presence of God and the work of God throughout their mothering experiences. It becomes apparent to the participants over time that although they birth and mother their children, they are not in control. As P10 says, "I used to have this mindset that if I just did all the right steps and parent in a biblical manner that this kid would follow God." Instead, she realizes that she cannot make those sorts of decisions for her child for they are not hers to make. There is a common thread of submission and letting go throughout the participants' sacred stories that acknowledges their place in the greater story. Regarding difficulties in one of her children's lives, P7 confesses "there's nothing I can do about it but ask God to be God in their lives." At the same time, she grieves, "It's hard, it's hard to let go." P5 describes a mother's love as "unending" and not knowing what it might entail, but a mother's heart capacity grows and changes and a mother learns to "hold them lightly, to let them be them, and eventually to let them go." Note the deep unconditional love and, at the same

time, the willingness to let them be. There is a distinct releasing of control and a willingness to let go of any perceived sense of power.

A story that P7 remembers from one summer years ago illustrates the sort of confidence in the Spirit that we need as a church. After an enjoyable and full summer with her children, she is not ready for them to go back to school in September. She says, “I remember very clearly God saying to me in my head—the same Holy Spirit that is in you, is in them.” It is an invitation to trust that God is everywhere and that we do not control or manage the Spirit.¹ Therefore, the church can rightly find her place in the grand story of reality by acknowledging God as the giver and bearer of new life.

It is as Luke, the writer of Acts, says that in Christ we live and move and have our being (Acts 17:28) and then in the book of Colossians, Paul says that Christ holds all things together (Col 1:17). All life and love find its origin in God. Helen Cepero makes the distinction between choosing to live with Jesus, rather than for Jesus, as intentionally living with God in the present time. She says, “when we live for God rather than with God, it is easy for us to move ahead on our own steam only to find ourselves resentful or frustrated, exhausted, or burned out. Living with God means following his lead, being in his time, letting God’s love instead of our own effort fuel our actions.”² However, if we recognize that it is God alone who births new life, we can participate with God without the burdensome (and impossible) responsibility of creating life on our own.

¹ In *Abuelita Faith*, Armas refers to Zaida Maldonado Pérez, co-author of *Latinas Evangélicas*, who calls the Holy Spirit the “Wild Child of the Trinity—untameable, full of possibilities and creative potential, wonderfully elusive yet always fully present.” (*Abuelita Faith*, 45).

² Cepero, *Journaling as a Spiritual Practice*, 99.

Stepping Aside

The practical implication for the church is that the church is released from the responsibility to make things happen. Instead, there is full confidence in the Spirit of God. It is the metaphor of the Vine and the branches that ought to shape our understanding. Our responsibility is to dwell or abide and to allow the life force of the Vine to flow in and through us. This requires a deep and fearless confidence in the power and love of God. If the church is embodying full confidence in God as the One who gives birth to new spiritual life, then we can admit that we do not always have the answer. As P7 concludes her interview, she says

It took me a long time to allow myself to doubt and to question
I feel ok with questioning God
And not expecting him to necessarily even answer
Just questioning and thinking things through and saying—ok, I don't know
But you're God
I'll have to let you decide that one

If we are confident in God, we do not have to be in control. We can let go, be less judgmental, and less anxious. We as the church can be comfortable with not always fully knowing or understanding the many complex issues and situations of our times. It is that shift from “please, please, please prayers” to trusting that God is working all things out and that all shall be well. As P9 reflects in her interview, when we beg God to act in a particular way in a situation, we are forfeiting an opportunity to participate with God. The task “is not to get God to do something we think needs to get done, but to become aware of what God is doing so that we can participate in it.”³ Therefore, as we let God be God as the Divine Storyteller, we can instead participate with (rather than perform for) God. This requires humility, patience, and attentiveness.

³ Frost and Rice, *To Alter Your World*, 65.

As we step aside for God to be the main character in the story of the church, we do so with confidence and serenity. After all, it is God who is giving birth to new life. In the biblical narrative, there is a humorous exchange between Moses and God as Moses refuses to take primary responsibility of the Israelite people. He asks God

Did I conceive all these people? Did I give them birth? Why do you tell me to carry them in my arms, as a nurse carries an infant, to the land you promised on oath to their ancestors? Where can I get meat for all these people? They keep wailing to me, ‘Give us meat to eat!’ I cannot carry all these people by myself; the burden is too heavy for me (Num 11:12–14).

The truth in Moses’ response is the recognition that he plays a supporting role, not the lead role. There is no need for worry. Regardless of the circumstances, we are oriented towards God and can be a non-anxious presence in our communities. If the church is to be described by those around us, let the chosen words be “serene,” “unflappable,” and “imperturbable.” In a world that is embedded with anxiety, may the church embody peace and steadiness and be a haven for those seeking shelter.

Acting as Midwives

The church stepping aside as the main character aligns with the midwifery metaphor that Michael Frost and Christiana Rice propose in their book, *To Alter the World*.⁴ They argue that we are midwives to the new life that God is birthing in the world around us: “We believe that God is birthing redemptive realities in our world, and we are summoned to assist in the miracle of new life.”⁵ They suggest five midwifery practices for the church:

⁴ Note the difference in meaning between midwife and obstetrician. The term midwife means “with woman” while the term obstetrician means to “stand in front of.” Frost and Rice, *To Alter Your World*, 65.

⁵ Frost and Rice, *To Alter Your World*, 64.

1. To release our agendas,
2. Shape the environment,
3. Hold the space for birth to happen,
4. Be flexible and fearless,
5. To live out a new narrative.⁶

As midwives, we assist in the birth, but we are not the birthing mother. Frost and Rice are clear to point out that we “join the story, not as bystanders or even as recipients but as companions.”⁷

To act as midwives, then we must be present. So we avoid the temptation to withdraw or retreat from culture, but we choose to inhabit the places where we are. We must be available and present and in the midst of the world.

Jenn Richards is also a proponent of the midwifery metaphor in terms of evangelism. She proposes a shift from a military metaphor to a midwifery metaphor. Rather than conquering converts or viewing unbelievers as targets, Richards argues that “the work of evangelism involves accepting the invitation God is lavishly offering God’s people to be spiritual midwives in the redemptive work God is birthing and to bear witness to this work through our everyday actions and words.”⁸ She sees the practice of conversational storytelling as a way we can midwife and bear witness to God’s work and goodness in everyday life.⁹ When we are invited by the Spirit to share our gospel-filled sacred tales, we do so not knowing what may happen in these situations. We do not have

⁶ These five practices are explored across several chapters. Frost and Rice, *To Alter Your World*, 68–114.

⁷ Frost and Rice, *To Alter Your World*, 65.

⁸ Richards, “Soldiers to Midwives,” 104.

⁹ Richards, “Soldiers to Midwives,” 111.

control nor do we seek control; but instead, we trust that God is birthing new life and we tend to the presence of God in our own lives and the world around us.

A few weeks ago, I told the man who owns our local coffee shop a sacred tale of my own. My Dad died suddenly of Covid-19 only a week or two after our move across the country a few years ago. I felt very much alone as I grieved in my new town. My coffee-shop-owner friend delivered a dozen muffins to my door (as per the request of a friend). The look on his face and the gracious and heartfelt response as I explained the reason for the muffin delivery was spiritually comforting. I told him that he was the grace of God to me that day. I do not know how this will unfold or what God is doing but I trust that God is doing something.

The metaphor of midwifery shifts the focus to include the church's being, rather than doing. Christopher J. H. Wright asks the question "what kind of people are we?"¹⁰ He notes the danger of missional activity primarily involving "taking the whole gospel to the whole world" or "getting the job done" while forgetting that what kind of people we are is also part of our missional activity.¹¹ More than ever, who we are as the church matters. As we release our sense of control as to what God is doing, we can direct our energy to being the people of God in community. There is "no biblical mission without biblical ethics."¹² Proclamation and presence belong together, as our missiology and our ecclesiology are undeniably linked.

¹⁰ Wright, *Mission of God's People*, 29.

¹¹ Wright, *Mission of God's People*, 29.

¹² Wright, *Mission of God's People*, 94.

Fully Present and Attentive as Guests

In regard to our participation with God, we are required to be fully present and keenly attentive. We must learn the art of listening and of asking good questions. We must adopt a more Socratic way of relating to the world, in which our questions prompt further thinking and expose faulty reasoning and false understandings. Instead of being speech makers, it is time to learn how to make conversation that is generative and constructive. Our humility and willingness to learn must be evident. As feminist theologian Kat Armas warns, “Oftentimes, when we feel like we have the answers, we stop paying attention.”¹³ Reminiscent of Ignatian spirituality, Shannon Evans argues that a patriarchal God demands our respect while a matriarchal God requests our awareness.¹⁴ It is our awareness that can lead us to wise living and being as the church. Since it is God who gives birth to new life and we participate with God, it is important for the church to step aside so God remains the key character in the narrative. However, our responsibility is to awareness and paying attention. Especially in times of quiet and inactivity, we trust that this is a period of divine gestation and we wait.

In *Abuelita Faith*, Armas insists in her abuelita theological approach that we reimagine our traditional image of hospitality.¹⁵ She disagrees with the idea that we make space at our table for people on the margins. Instead, she argues that people on the margins have their own tables: “An abuelita faith calls for the dominant culture to leave

¹³ Armas, *Abuelita Faith*, 13.

¹⁴ Evans, *Rewilding Motherhood*, 163.

¹⁵ As a Cuban feminist theologian, Armas defines abuelita theology as “the practice of uncovering and naming our abuelas [grandmothers from our lives and ‘abuelita theologians’ through Scripture] who have inspired, taught, and guided us in our process of becoming and belonging.” An abuelita theology is composed of multiple voices from the lived experiences of various women. Armas says it is a theology “birthed through *lo cotidiano*, the everyday,” and is sometimes called “kitchen theology.” (*Abuelita Faith*, 19–20).

its own tables and join the marginalized at theirs.”¹⁶ I appreciate her decolonized approach to hospitality as this is a posture the church needs to adopt as we relate to our communities.

In terms of a missional hospitality, I also propose that we imagine God as the host and we as the guests. In this understanding of hospitality, we position ourselves among the guests, rather than as the host. As guests, we acknowledge and accept the invitation and generosity of our Divine Host with gratitude, while extending great courtesy and respect to the other guests. Likewise, as guests, we do not choose the form of the meal that is served, although we know it is always the good news of the Gospel. We do not choose who we sit beside at the table. Essentially, we do not choose our neighbours.

There is a sense of camaraderie rather than hierarchy between us and the other guests. Gandolfo says that this is what the natal perspective reveals—interdependence and relationality as our anthropological constant.¹⁷ As the church, the natural bond of our common humanity connects and ties us to our neighbours and community. Do we primarily think of ourselves as the church as separate or set apart from the world? Have we forgotten our shared common human experience? Gandolfo argues that the “realization that the human embodiment of divine love does not require the rejection of vulnerability in pursuit of untouchable invulnerability”¹⁸ so we avoid the temptation to cling to privilege or “ruthless egotism” while also refusing “apathetic passivity.”¹⁹ Embodiment and relationship is unpredictable, sometimes threatening, and almost

¹⁶ Armas, *Abuelita Faith*, 137.

¹⁷ Gandolfo, *Power and Vulnerability of Love*, 48.

¹⁸ Gandolfo, *Power and Vulnerability of Love*, 234.

¹⁹ Gandolfo, *Power and Vulnerability of Love*, 236.

always inconvenient. However, as the church we can adjust our view of the world and forego our desire for comfort and control. Mothers have the advantage of personally experiencing extending hospitality to the stranger. Mothers are comfortable with the unfamiliar, as the mothering experience naturally helps them grow accustomed to their lack of power regarding their child and their future. Therefore, as the church, we embrace the unexpected and sometimes uncomfortable with the full confidence that God will accomplish what God desires. Then we live wide awake to the divine clues as to what God is doing and participate accordingly.

Maternal Love Marked by Compassion

Through childbirth and mothering, mothers have a close relationship with those who are most vulnerable, which overflows as a deep compassion for their communities and the world in general. Interestingly, the Hebrew word for compassion comes from the same root word as womb. According to Armas, this reminds us that “compassion is an embodied experience formed in one of the most intimate parts of the human body, and it must be birthed and nurtured from inside of us into the world.”²⁰ Compassion then is not a disembodied, impersonal form of love; but, instead, proximity and vulnerability gives birth to compassion.

According to Diane Bergant, the Hebrew word *rahmim* (translated as compassion) is derived from the Hebrew root word *rehem*, meaning womb.²¹ Bergant names this understanding of compassion important because it reveals something about

²⁰ Armas, *Abuelita Faith*, 105.

²¹ Bergant, “Compassion in the Bible,” 10.

the nature of God and it forms the reason for and nature of compassion that we are to have towards others. Although we tend to think of compassion as a human emotion, compassion is first a divine attribute. Bergant notes that to describe God as compassionate seems to suggest that God is not impassible, or incapable of suffering.²² Instead, God is the God who saves and judges, but at the same time, is compassionate and willing to suffer. Exod 34:6 is God's self description as compassionate, gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness. Compassion is God's "fundamental character that informs all divine activity and, therefore, can be considered a controlling metaphor."²³ Compassion constitutes God's very being.

Biblical studies scholar Carissa Quinn also describes God as womb-like. Quinn states that compassion is an emotional word, sometimes translated as "deeply stirred."²⁴ She highlights the emotional bond between God and humanity, not based on pity but on empathy that is accompanied by action. God's love as compassionate is modeled by mothers as they are empathetic and share in their children's passion or pain. Think of a nursing mother whose milk unconsciously lets down when she hears the cries of her infant (or anyone's infant!). Many new mothers can attest to physical embodiment of compassion. This is the sort of responsive love that God is described as having for us.

However, the fierce and tender compassion that marks the mission of the church aims for more than empathy. Bergant moves beyond the comforting aspect of compassion and focuses more on the generativity and restorative aspect of God's compassion. She describes God's love as "always straining toward some kind of union"

²² Bergant, "Compassion in the Bible," 11.

²³ Bergant, "Compassion in the Bible," 12.

²⁴ Quinn and Mackie, "Womb of God", August 30, 2020.

and “as the womb brings to birth life with all of its possibilities, so divine compassion brings to rebirth life that was threatened or perhaps even lost.”²⁵

How then does the church display a maternal love marked by God’s compassion which is comforting and creative in terms of restoration? Bergant asks piercing questions to help sharpen our understanding of compassionate love that mirrors God:

Is our compassion ethnocentric? Denominational? Nationalistic? In any way chauvinistic? Is it merely an emotional response to the plight of those we love or of those who suffer some misfortune that we can understand or with which we can empathize or sympathize? Does it reach out to our political rivals? To our opponents in armed conflict? To criminals who have seriously wronged us? To people who do not particularly like us? Can we show compassion to people whom our society has dismissed as beyond help or unworthy of our concern?²⁶

Our cultural moment is ripe for this sort of compassionate response from the church.

Division and conflict accompany much of our public discourse and private conversations. What if our love for each other within the body of Christ and for our neighbour was marked with a tender but fierce maternal compassion? This sort of compassion will stretch us just as the Incarnate Christ did so within the maternal body of Mary.

Preciousness of Human Life

Throughout the interviews, the awareness of the preciousness of human life is a heavy burden at times. P3 confesses that this new realization also makes her want to “shut life out,” and to use protective or defense mechanisms to protect her from the pain. There is a temptation to “self-protect by disconnecting from suffering.” She also admits that she sometimes makes assumptions or comes up with explanations to explain away tragedy: “I know it’s not fair or even accurate but it’s a way to protect myself against the

²⁵ Bergant, “Compassion in the Bible,” 24–25.

²⁶ Bergant, “Compassion in the Bible,” 33.

realization that this could be any of us.” Thinking of a recent earthquake, the pain of life is sometimes overwhelming and yet mothering has invariably expanded her heart to include all those who suffered. She imagines that this is how God feels about us:

That’s how God feels for every one of us
 There is this sense of shared struggle and shared humanity
 This is how God feels for those who are the least loveable
 And today, that might be me

The sacredness of human life extends to the whole world, does not favour the deserving, and does not exclude oneself, as illustrated by the above quote from P3. The compassion that she feels for her own children spills over to other children, even those on the other side of the world, simply because there is a new understanding of the preciousness of human life. The question for the church then is how do we embody the preciousness of human life as we consider political and social issues, such as the plight of refugees and displaced persons, abortion, foster care, and medical assistance in dying (MAID)?

Enlarged Heart

P8 also describes this enlarged mother heart for her community. During cancer treatments, P8’s world became smaller as her health declined. However, she still feels this sense of mothering for those in her community and at the local school. She walks and prays for her neighbourhood, saying, “I love that, there’s space for my mother heart there.”

P7 notes an increase in grace for people she would have previously discounted:

Now I look at people differently!
 Who God accepts has changed over the years
 If you could hear one of our very best friends talk
 You would think—oh my!
 At one stage, I would have thought—well, you’re not walking with God
 But this man is a godly, godly man.

P3 testifies that

My sense of compassion and empathy have increased
I value life more
These individuals are more precious or sacred than I thought before

P5 acknowledges that mothering has changed her:

Absolutely
I think mothering makes you more
Understanding
Tolerant
It makes you step back and ask
Well, what else is going on in this situation?
What's the back story?
There's more to life than just what I see
You realize that there is more to whoever this person is in front of you

The habit of pausing before making quick judgement is part of compassion. P7 also mentions our human need for “those kinds of compassionate eyes,” someone who is non-judgmental and who loves and accepts us without conditions, referring to Image #7. Mothering has taught her over the years how important that sort of compassion and safety are, due to the loneliness and judgement she felt as a young mother. She desires to have “those kinds of compassionate eyes” for her own adult children.

One time my son said to us that most of us take a meandering path to God
That's how my parenting has been—a very meandering path
I would get on a kick this way and I would follow this book
Then I'd get on another one
Then I quit reading books all together on parenting
So it's been a meandering path
I don't feel like there's been a straight line in there at all
It's been random and haphazard and just a big mess
But when I say a big mess—I don't mean that it's been bad

Although the increased understanding and enlarged heart extends to the bigger world, it does not escape the most personal of relationships. P9 notes that mothering has given her

a better understanding of her own mom. In fact, mothering has healed some of the hurt and misunderstanding that existed in her own relationship with her mother.

According to Banks, the personal experience of birth opens mothers up to the experiences of others: “Birth, like democratic politics, challenges us with otherness, with the putting aside of oneself to make room for another person, and with the challenges of difference and plurality.”²⁷ There is an increased sense of compassion that is common throughout many of the maternal narratives that originates from the experience of giving birth. Gandolfo agrees as she reflects on her own mothering experience and says,

When I bend down to kiss their precious faces, I know myself truly to be kissing the face of God. At the same time, I know now at a deeply immediate, undeniable, and visceral level what I had previously assented to at an intellectual and functional level: that every child is this precious. Every child, every person is the image of God. Meditation on my own little icons has heightened my awareness of the presence of the divine in all children and, indeed, in all of humanity and all of creation.²⁸

Gandolfo goes on to say that this sort of love is not “easy, sweet, or romantic”: Instead, this sort of compassion and attention requires hard work.²⁹ Remembering the video of George Floyd calling out for his mother while he was held face down on the pavement by an officer’s knee and unable to breathe, “All mothers were summoned when George Floyd called out for his mama.”³⁰ As Armas says, Floyd’s plea for his mother “drew a visceral response from moms all over the world.”³¹ The practice of mothering strengthens our sense of compassion for humanity. What if the church was known for her mother heart for the community?

²⁷ Banks, “Reckoning with Birth,” May 26, 2023.

²⁸ Gandolfo, “Breastfeeding as Contemplative Practice,” 169.

²⁹ Gandolfo, “Breastfeeding as Contemplative Practice,” 169.

³⁰ Armas, *Abuelita Faith*, 117.

³¹ Armas, *Abuelita Faith*, 117.

Commitment to Action

Zylla defines compassion as “a desire to alleviate the suffering of others, the capacity to act on behalf of others, and a commitment to sustain engagement with the suffering other.”³² If we are tempted to reduce compassion to feelings of pity or empathy, the biblical example of compassion as seen in the Incarnation reminds us that compassion is more than that. Compassion goes beyond an emotional response to “action, sympathy, and alleviation of the causes of suffering identified.”³³ The mother heart feels the suffering of others, but then participates with God in the redemptive work that God is doing. As Zylla puts it, “We move from being keen observers to careful assessors to creative intervenors.”³⁴ For the church, this means coming alongside those who suffer and offering help.

God noticed (and continues to notice) our suffering, and thus, the Incarnation. It is important to note that for the church to offer assurances that God is with those who suffer but fail to act is an incomplete and shallow sort of compassion. Our compassion must imitate God’s compassion, which “moves in the path of downward service and actions of godly love to alleviate suffering and to work for the abolition of the causes of suffering.”³⁵ Compassion requires close proximity, which means we must fight the tendency to avoid or mitigate the suffering around us.³⁶ As P7 says,

Rather than just proclaiming what we believe and that what we say is right
But that we let Jesus live in us and through us

³² Zylla, “Inhabiting Compassion,” 1–9.

³³ Zylla, “Inhabiting Compassion,” 1–9.

³⁴ Zylla, “Inhabiting Compassion,” 1–9.

³⁵ Zylla, *Roots of Sorrow*, 111.

³⁶ Zylla explores our tendency to withdraw from suffering further in Chapter 4: “From Indifference to Compassion”, addressing our apathy and indifference towards suffering. Understanding our natural inclination to distance ourselves from suffering is essential to strengthening our missional sense of compassion. (*Roots of Sorrow*, 91–111).

That we be his hands and feet

A strong sense of compassion originates from a philosophy of birth. When we remember that we are natal beings, we remember that we have the capacity to act—for the good of others. Banks says, “minimizing birth means diminishing one of the greatest powers humans have had: the creation and sustenance of life itself, the bringing forth of a next generation that might live better, imagine more, suffer less, and create a more lasting world.”³⁷ Our tender love for the world is also fierce, just as God’s love is described as a mother bear (Hos 13:8).

The Inevitability of Suffering

The mothering experience consists of making space for something new. The blooming belly of a pregnant woman is the very visible enlargement of one’s self, and at the same time, tangible evidence of the submission and suffering involved. P4 grieves the loss of agency and freedom as she notices her husband’s ability to continue to plan his day as he desires, but her daily schedule accommodates nursing, naps, and eating schedules of babies and young children. She uses words like “difficulty,” “jealousy,” “envious,” and “frustration” describing her submission to mothering and its responsibilities.

Suffering is seen as a natural part of mothering. Mothers expect to suffer because the very nature of mothering involves such investment and pouring in and then letting go. Although the grief of letting go is real, it does not cause mothers to change their mind about their decision to mother. P5 says “it cost financially—a whole salary

³⁷ Banks, “Reckoning with Birth.”

actually and it will probably keep costing,” but at the same time, she says “but I have everything I need so it’s not really a cost. I do not think it hurt me in any way. It always felt like a win-win.”

If the church is to love her neighbours and the world around her with an unconditional love marked by compassion, suffering is inevitable. Are we willing to be misunderstood? Taken advantage of? Unappreciated and unrecognized? Or does our love fluctuate according to the response we receive? Are we prepared to suffer? The narrative of Jesus washing the disciple’s feet illustrates the suffering involved with unconditional love. Jesus submitted himself to a lowly act of service though he was about to be betrayed and ghosted by two of the men he dearly loved.

Gandolfo says that “the power of the nursing mother, and of God, is not the power of coercion, but rather the power of persuasion.”³⁸ Therefore, are we willing to set power aside and adopt a posture of wooing instead? This is a risky venture requiring courage and patience without any guarantees. We may be rejected, ignored, and ridiculed; but the unconditionality nature of love perseveres. The gift of mothering is that mercy increases and mothers experience an increased sensitivity to suffering. Carnes says that “because of you [her child], the suffering of the world has become vivid to me.”³⁹ She goes on to say,

In learning to love you, I’m opened to the beauty and vulnerability of all children in a new way. It is not that you become interchangeable with any other child—I remain especially attuned to you, the child who has been given particularly to me to love, in a way that is powerfully singular—but the potency of that love inspires more love, for other creatures like you.⁴⁰

³⁸ Gandolfo, “Breastfeeding as Contemplative Practice,” 175.

³⁹ Carnes, *Motherhood*, 43.

⁴⁰ Carnes, *Motherhood*, 47.

The nature of unconditional love means that we will not be indifferent to or ignorant of the suffering of others. We as the church will learn how to be increasingly aware, and we will remember how to weep. We will not always be or even strive to be triumphal; nor will we be indignant about the unfair ways we are treated. Instead, as the church, we will risk and love the world around us with the steadiness and depth of a mother's love, regardless of the hurt and suffering that will come our way.

Transition to Concluding Reflections

Women who engage in the spiritual practice of mothering have a knowledge of God that can shape the mission of the church. The theology within the maternal narratives, along with a philosophy of birth and a natal Christology, can assist the church as she navigates her sense of mission and contextualizes it for today's culture. Especially in light of isolation and division, cancel culture, and anxiety, the church needs to love her neighbours and the world in a way that evokes curiosity and is invitational.

CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

Amplifying the Maternal Voice

Wolfteich esteems autobiographical writing as a significant spiritual practice.¹ She believes that we “practice naming what is holy in our lives” as we write our own stories.² It is the art of noticing that is the spiritual skill we learn as we reflect on our lives and discern the presence of God in our own histories and contexts. Spiritual director and director of spiritual formation at North Park Theological Seminary, Cepero says that the “more authentically we travel into our own lives and our own stories, the more we will lay claim to God’s image deep within us.”³ Personal storytelling of the presence and work of God is not only a spiritual practice that allows us to know ourselves and to know God, but it is culturally appropriate and timely for our current age.

In response to the silence surrounding women’s experience, specifically the mothering experience, we are depriving ourselves as the church of important voices. Though mothering as a spiritual practice may not necessarily sparkle with transcendence and has been generally disregarded as theologically important, it is an ordinary practice that reveals deep truths about God. It is a rich resource that we have ignored but is waiting to be mined.

¹ Wolfteich, “Standing at the Gap,” 254.

² Wolfteich, “Standing at the Gap,” 254.

³ Cepero, *Journaling as a Spiritual Practice*, 9.

Women know things about God through the practice of mothering in a personal and experiential manner. Mothering has allowed women to know that God is present and active and that God seeks our participation in God's divine work of redemption. The mothering experience has facilitated experiences that reveal the depth and nature of God's love while revealing a God who suffers alongside us and, due to the nature of unconditional love, is vulnerable. The theology within the maternal narratives, along with a philosophy of birth and a natal Christology, can inform the mission of the church by emphasizing that it is God who gives birth to new life, by becoming a fierce but tender compassionate agent in our community, and by not shying away from vulnerability and suffering.

It seems fitting to me to complete this dissertation as we begin the season of Advent. Christ continues to come to us but we wonder how do we make space and welcome God in our own circles and communities? Our temptation to disengage from each other and our communities due to weariness and discouragement looms before us. The reality of the suffering in the world around us and as we look closer, in our immediate circles of contact, is disruptive and devastating. Yet, more than ever perhaps, our world needs the church to be a strong and steady, unoffendable, persevering presence while embodying a deep confidence in God. The women who engage in the spiritual practice of mothering can help us with this as they are already familiar with this manner of being—if the church is willing to listen and involve women in our missiology.

More and Better Storytelling

Finally, the theology of God is “refracted through our experience” and can be shared as story. As Frost urges,

Let’s get better at telling those stories. Not just what we used to call your “testimony” about how and when you became a Christian, but how God has turned up in your life, leading, guiding, shaping, pruning you into the person you’ve become. I think being able to tell your spiritual memoirs is an essential skill for all Christians. But many Christians really aren’t that good at it.⁴

Writer Jeff Goins concurs that most people are not good at telling their stories. He writes,

You don’t know your story as well as you think. Telling your story helps you make sense of your life — why certain events happened the way they did. You begin to examine what has happened to and through you. You begin to make sense of who you are. Most people don’t take the time to do this. They take their stories for granted; they don’t steward them.⁵

Sacred storytelling as a form of testimony needs to be taught as a spiritual practice and given space in our liturgy, communities of faith, and academic institutions.

However, we cannot pursue sacred storytelling without a deep understanding and experiential knowledge of the story of God. The story of God is inexplicably linked to our stories. If we desire to make meaning of our own existence and life, then we are beholden to the divine story. Buechner says,

It is possible to say that in spite of all its extraordinary variety, the Bible is held together by having a single plot. It is one that can be simply stated: God creates the world; the world gets lost; God seeks to restore the world to the glory for which he created it. That means that the Bible is a book about you and me, whom he also made and lost and continually seeks, so you might say that what holds it together more than anything else is us. You might add to that, of course, that of all the books that humanity has produced, it is the one which more than any other—and in more senses than one—also holds us together.⁶

⁴ Frost, “The Way You Tell Your Spiritual Autobiography Matters.”

⁵ Goins, “3 Reasons Why You Must Become an Expert.”

⁶ Buechner, *Clown in the Belfry*, 44.

Our stories are most fitting and meaningful within an understanding of the biblical narrative, which means that we pursue greater awareness of both stories—human and divine—simultaneously and intentionally. This requires an intellectual knowing but also the necessary discernment to know how these two stories are intertwined.

Even though postmodern thinkers may question the idea of a meta-narrative, we recognize the importance of the personal narrative. Despite the truth in evidential apologetics and reason, a story-based approach to understanding life and faith can be a more engaging, meaningful, and hospitable approach that invites others into non-confrontational, welcoming conversation. Rational arguments lack the “imaginative depth and emotional intelligence” that sacred storytelling offers.⁷ In *Evangelism in a Skeptical World*, Sam Chan argues for more storytelling in our evangelism. He says that “in modernity, people preferred hearing propositional data: ‘Give me the facts!’” But in postmodernity, people prefer hearing stories: “Show me what this looks like!”⁸

Chan describes the assumptions of the postmodern age (1980s to present).⁹ Postmodernity recognizes the subjectivity of the individual as something to be acknowledged and celebrated. It is not thought of negatively as something to avoid or something that unfavorably colors our view. Instead, it simply is. Context is part of who we are and should be named. Because there are no absolutes in the postmodern mind, proof and evidence are not convincing. While modernity chiefly recognized reason as the way of knowing, postmodernity is epistemologically diverse. Experience, emotions, and tradition are also valid ways of knowing.

⁷ McGrath, *Narrative Apologetics*, 8.

⁸ Chan, *Evangelism in a Skeptical World*, 119.

⁹ Chan, *Evangelism in a Skeptical World*, 112–15.

Therefore, rather than putting truth in the forefront, the beauty and goodness of our own personal stories may be more culturally timely virtues.¹⁰ Phyllis Tickle tells the story of watching a young man respond to the beauty of the Virgin Birth: “He had moved beyond mere facts to understanding based on apprehending beauty. I felt like I was standing on holy ground.”¹¹ Meek also promotes beauty as “an event of epiphany” as it “marries within itself the good and the true.”¹² There is something beautiful about our sacred tales that we can highlight, confident that the goodness and truth of God are part of the beauty. I am convinced that beauty can appropriately play an important role in our sacred storytelling as we give testimony to the beautiful things God is doing and revealing in our own lives.

Ruffing notes that it is the pervasive postmodern philosophy that has increased our need for personal storytelling.¹³ Johnston agrees that in our age we long for story, rather than speeches: “As modernity comes to its end and we move ever more strongly into the post-modern era, the use of first-order testimony is increasingly important. The overreliance on detached argument has become suspect. Most of us recognize that we think perspectively.”¹⁴ The traditional ‘proofs’ of God and apologetic evidence that demands a response can no longer be the primary way we give testimony of the presence of the Divine in our lives. Instead, I believe that sacred storytelling can help us escape from our postmodern dismissal of the transcendent and free us to recognize the presence

¹⁰ Robert K. Johnston also suspects that it is most appropriate in our cultural moment to “begin with beauty, and then move to goodness, before considering truth.” He refers to Pope John Paul II who said in a speech to artists 20 years ago that the church’s connection to its youth and the wider world will be beauty. (*God’s Wider Presence*, xvii).

¹¹ Tickle, *Prayer Is a Place*, 138–39.

¹² Meek, *Doorway to Artistry*, 123.

¹³ Ruffing, *To Tell the Sacred Tale*, ix.

¹⁴ Johnston, *God’s Wider Presence*, 2.

of God in our lives and to live freely and fully. Guinness argues that our stories, as prompted by transcendent signals, can free us from the “secularist and materialist worldview [that] is poor, narrow, limited and constricting.”¹⁵ He says that “for too long we have been content with a shrunken and lopsided view of truth and reality that has excluded transcendence. We have been schooled to think that there is no more to truth and reality than whatever reason and the five senses can discover.”¹⁶ However, the invitational God’s love is persuasive, rather than coercive, and God’s wooing comes in the form of a story; we are invited to respond through faith and imagination with our own stories. As Chan says, “when I make a truth claim, the hearer is being asked to believe it or reject it. But when I tell a story, for the entire time I’m telling the story, the hearer has to assume my narrational standpoint.”¹⁷ If we change our pedagogy from “truth, belief, and praxis” to “praxis, belief, and truth,” it is more appropriate for our postmodern world because the postmodern mindset is more interested in the personal, practical realities of the Christian faith, rather than the objective truth of the Christian faith.¹⁸ Therefore, the persuasive and invitational nature of storytelling opens the door to new possibilities and new understandings. Honest storytelling is free of manipulation and force and, instead, is highly respectful of the individual; therefore, it is most appropriate for our cultural moment.¹⁹

In our cultural moment of division, conflict, and often unfruitful public discourse, there tends to be an openness and appreciation for our own personal stories.

¹⁵ Guinness, *Signals of Transcendence*, 116.

¹⁶ Guinness, *Signals of Transcendence*, 116.

¹⁷ Chan, *Evangelism in a Skeptical World*, 119.

¹⁸ Chan, *Evangelism in a Skeptical World*, 125.

¹⁹ Peterson, *Eat This Book*, 41.

Perhaps this is a good and beautiful way to converse with one another. With deep confidence in the pervading presence of God throughout all of life, we can view our ordinary lives as sacred texts in which God is active and conversant. Equipped with tools of spiritual discernment, we can practice the art of paying attention to the Divine in everyday life and then, tell our sacred tales. This is holy conversation, marked with civility and curiosity, that honours each other as made in the image of God and is personal, respectful, and filled with wonder. After all, “there are no ordinary people” and we have “never talked to a mere mortal.”²⁰ Telling and listening to sacred tales about everyday life is hospitable conversation that speaks of the persistent holy sense of the presence of God and the dignity of the human experience.

²⁰ Lewis, *Weight of Glory*, 46.

APPENDIX A. SOCIAL MEDIA POST FOR RECRUITMENT

**Study Title:****Sacred Storytelling: Knowing God through the Practice of Mothering**

This research study seeks to investigate how storytelling helps women articulate their experiences of God within the practice of mothering.

Research Volunteers Needed

As part of my research for the Doctor of Practical Theology program with McMaster Divinity College at McMaster University, I am looking for volunteers who are women, identify as Christian, speak English, and are mothers (pregnant or with natural born or adopted children). Participants must be aware that they will be asked to discuss personal matters regarding their spirituality and mothering.

You would be asked to be interviewed by the researcher to discuss how you have experienced God within the practice of mothering.

Your participation would involve ONE session of approximately 1 hour with a possible second interview to clarify any questions the researcher may have. The second online interview will be on an as-needed basis and could take as long as 15 min. The interviews will take place online as a Zoom video call.

The risks involved in participating in this study are minimal. You may worry that your stories are not worth sharing or wonder how others might respond to your stories. However, please know that you do not need to answer questions that you do not want to answer or that make you feel uncomfortable. You may also choose to stop participating at any moment without question. During the interview, you may ask to end prematurely. Please note that no repercussions will stem from the answers that you give or if you wish to opt out as a participant.

Anyone requesting more information or agreeing to participate will be emailed a copy of the Letter of Information/Consent which elaborates on the details of the study.

For more information about this study or to volunteer for this study,

please contact the researcher:

Elizabeth Millar

McMaster Divinity College

Researcher's supervisor:

Dr. Phil Zylla

McMaster Divinity College

*Artwork by Rebekah Cummings. Permission granted.

This study has been reviewed by and received ethics clearance from the McMaster Research Ethics Board. Social Media Recruitment – Version date: October 23, 2022

APPENDIX B: MREB CERTIFICATE OF ETHICS CLEARANCE



McMaster University Research Ethics Board (MREB)
 c/o Research Office for Administrative Development and Support
 MREB Secretariat, GH-305
 1280 Main St. W.
 Hamilton, Ontario, L8W 4L8
 email: ethicsoffice@mcmaster.ca
 Phone: 905-525-9140 ext. 23142

CERTIFICATE OF ETHICS CLEARANCE TO INVOLVE HUMAN PARTICIPANTS IN RESEARCH

Today's Date: Jan/15/2023

Supervisor: Dr. Phil Zylla
Student Investigator: DPT student Elizabeth Millar
Applicant: Elizabeth Millar
Project Title: Sacred Storytelling: Knowing God through the Practice of Mothering
MREB#: 5974

Dear Researcher(s)

The ethics application and supporting documents for MREB# 5974 entitled "Sacred Storytelling: Knowing God through the Practice of Mothering" have been reviewed and cleared by the MREB to ensure compliance with the Tri-Council Policy Statement and the McMaster Policies and Guidelines for Research Involving Human Participants.

The application protocol is cleared as revised without questions or requests for modification. The above named study is to be conducted in accordance with the most recent approved versions of the application and supporting documents.

If this project includes planned in-person contact with research participants, then procedures for addressing COVID-19 related risks must be addressed according to the current processes communicated by the Vice-President (Research) and your Associate Dean (Research). All necessary approvals must be secured before in-person contact with research participants can take place.

Ongoing clearance is contingent on completing the Annual Report in advance of the yearly anniversary of the original ethics clearance date: Jan/11/2024. If the Annual Report is not submitted, then ethics clearance will lapse on the expiry date and Research Finance will be notified that ethics clearance is no longer valid (TCPS, Art. 6.14).

An Amendment form must be submitted and cleared before any substantive alterations are made to the approved research protocol and documents (TCPS, Art. 6.16).

Researchers are required to report Adverse Events (i.e. an unanticipated negative consequence or result affecting participants) to the MREB secretariat and the MREB Chair as soon as possible, and no more than 3 days after the event occurs (TCPS, Art. 6.15). A privacy breach affecting participant information should also be reported to the MREB secretariat and the MREB Chair as soon as possible. The Reportable Events form is used to document adverse events, privacy breaches, protocol deviations and participant complaints.

Document Type	File Name	Date	Version
Letters of Support	MREB - Mental Health Support	Nov/09/2022	1
Test Instruments	Sacred Storytelling images	Nov/19/2022	1
Recruiting Materials	MREB - Recruitment - Social Media post	Jan/09/2023	2
Recruiting Materials	MREB - Recruitment - Email Script	Jan/09/2023	2
Recruiting Materials	MREB - Screening questions	Jan/09/2023	1
Interviews	MREB - Interview Questions	Jan/09/2023	2
Consent Forms	MREB - Oral Consent Log	Jan/09/2023	2
Consent Forms	MREB - Oral Consent Script	Jan/09/2023	2
Consent Forms	MREB Letter of Information/Consent	Jan/09/2023	2
Response Documents	Summary of Revision for MREB 5974 Millar	Jan/09/2023	1

Dr. Nikolaos Yiannakoulis

Dr. Tara La Rose, MREB Chair Associate Professor School of Social Work Faculty of Social Sciences 905-525-9140 x23785 larost1@mcmaster.ca	Dr. Brian Detlor, MREB Vice-Chair Professor Information Systems DeGroote School of Business 905-525-9140 x23949 detlorb@mcmaster.ca	Dr. Niko Yiannakoulis, MREB Vice-Chair Associate Professor School of Earth, Environment & Society Faculty of Science 905-525-9140 x20117 yiannan@mcmaster.ca
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APPENDIX C: LETTER OF INFORMATION AND CONSENT



LETTER OF INFORMATION / CONSENT

Study Title: Sacred Storytelling: Knowing God through the Practice of Motherhood

Principal Investigator:

Elizabeth Millar
 Doctor of Practical Theology program
 McMaster Divinity College

Faculty Supervisor:

Dr. Phil Zylla
 McMaster Divinity College
 Hamilton, Ontario, Canada

Purpose of the Study:

You are invited to take part in this study on storytelling. I want to explore what mothers know about God through the practice of mothering. This project will contribute to further understanding of sacred storytelling (or testimony), the theology within maternal narratives, and mothering as a spiritual vocation.

I am doing this research as part of a doctoral dissertation at McMaster Divinity College in the department of Practical Theology, under the supervision of Dr. Phil Zylla.

What will happen during the study?

The study will be about 1 hour long as an online Zoom video call in January to April 2023. I will start by asking you for some background information like your age, location, number of children, and church denomination. Then you will be shown 16 different images, to prompt two to three stories from your experience as a mother. I will be asking you questions like "Where have you experienced God as a mother?", "Tell me about a time when you felt close to God as a mother", and "What have you learned about God through your mothering experience?". The project at hand is not designed to critique you as a mother, but to learn from your experience, wisdom, and insight.

With your permission, I would like to record the Zoom call (audio and video), as well as taking handwritten notes during the interview. I would also like permission to use participants' direct quotes.

If necessary for clarification, a short second interview would be scheduled that could take up to 15 minutes.

The participants will be emailed the key themes that were discovered during the interview process in order to gain their feedback and validate my findings. This will be done in a second interview near the conclusion of the study. Participants will be invited to review the study findings at the end of the study and provide feedback in order to ensure the findings accurately reflect their experience.

Are there any risks to doing this study?

The risks involved in participating in this study are minimal. You may worry that your stories are not worth sharing or wonder how others might respond to your stories. However, please know that you do not need to answer questions that you do not want to answer or that make you feel uncomfortable. You may also choose to stop participating at any moment without question. During the interview, you may ask to end prematurely. Please note that no repercussions will stem from the answers that you give or if you wish to opt out as a participant.

Social risks are minimal but could occur if the privacy and anonymity of the participant was not maintained. If a participant disclosed a particular traumatic event that was embarrassing or in which the participant did not act in an appropriate manner, this could lead to loss of status or reputation if the identity of the person was revealed. Risk will be minimized by protecting privacy and ensuring anonymity through use of a code to identify participants and through removal of other possible identifiers in direct quotes or in explanations. All data will be stored in either a locked safe, or in the case of electronic data, on an encrypted external hard drive.

As interviews will be conducted by online videoconferencing, there can be risks associated with unsolicited access during the interview or leaking of data. To reduce these risks, a Zoom account will be used. Participants will be sent a private email invitation to the video interview and interviews will be recorded directly onto the researcher's personal computer. The interview file will then be transferred to two encrypted external hard drives for storage. These hard drives will be stored in a locked safe.

The waiting room feature of Zoom will be enabled.

The participants will be advised that they should be in a private location for the Zoom interview.

In the event that an incident of abuse is discovered, the proper authorities (a child welfare organization) will be contacted, if not previously done. All participants will be made aware at the beginning of the interview that abuse will be reported to the proper authorities, and that they should refrain from sharing these experiences if they do not wish the authorities to be contacted.

A list of mental health resources will be provided should you need help after participating in the study.

Are there any benefits to doing this study?

This study will not benefit you directly.

This study hopes to discover how storytelling helps to articulate spiritual experience as women are given the opportunity to tell their own stories, foster a sense of God-awareness and self-awareness for participants, uphold mothering as a spiritual practice, and to reveal what women know about God through the practice of mothering. This research will provide advancement to the field of Practical Theology.

Who will know what I said or did in the study?

Every effort will be made to protect your confidentiality and privacy. I will not use your name or any information that would allow you to be identified. Any individual references or quotations will be masked with a pseudonym. However, we are often identifiable through the stories we tell. Please keep this in mind in deciding what to tell me.

With your permission, I would like to record audio and video from the interviews to help me as I sort through the data; however, if you do not consent to this, it will not be used. In recording your answers, you will assigned a pseudonym in place of your actual name. Audio and video files will be safely stored in a password protected hard-drive and not anywhere online. Any paper documents will be kept in a locked safe where only I will have access to it. Only the researcher will have access to the research data and will be transcribing all recordings. Once transcribed, data will be anonymized. To protect participants from unwanted Zoom infiltrators, protocols will consist of using a password protected account and entry into the call will be given through the waiting room feature.

Please note that Zoom is an externally hosted cloud-based service. While this service is approved for collecting data in this study by the McMaster Research Ethics Board, there is a small risk with any platform such as this of data that is collected on external servers falling outside the control of the researcher. If you are concerned about this on Zoom and would like to read further about Zoom's privacy protocols and what steps are available to ensure confidentiality, please see: <https://zoom.us/docs/en-us/privacy-and-security.html>.

Once the study is complete, an archive of the data, without identifying information, will be maintained for five (5) years.

Legally Required Disclosure:

While confidentiality is desired, if you reveal an event (such as abuse) or a state of mind (such as suicidality) during the process, I will be required to contact the proper authorities so that steps may be taken. In this case, you may lose your confidentiality.

What if I change my mind about being in the study?

Your participation in this study is voluntary. It is your choice to be part of the study or not. If you decide to participate, you may withdraw for any reason by simply sending me an email stating your decision. If you decide to withdraw from the interview, there will be no consequences for you. In cases of withdrawal, any data you have provided will be destroyed unless you indicate that it is permissible to keep. If you do not want to answer some of the questions, you do not have to but can still be in the study. After the interview has been completed, if you change your mind about having your information used, you may contact me to withdraw your data. The estimated deadline to withdraw information is May 15, 2023.

How do I find out what was learned in this study?

I expect to have the field research for this study completed by May 31, 2023, and the final project completed by December 31, 2023. If you would like a brief summary of the results, please give me an email address to send it to.

Questions about the Study: If you have questions or need more information about the study itself, please contact me at:

Elizabeth Millar

This study has been reviewed by the McMaster Research Ethics Board and received ethics clearance. If you have concerns or questions about your rights as a participant or about the way the study is conducted, please contact:

McMaster Research Ethics Board Secretariat
Telephone: (905) 525-9140 ext. 23142

E-mail: ethicsoffice@mcmaster.ca

CONSENT

1. Have you read the information presented in the Letter of Information & Consent about the study being conducted by myself (Elizabeth Millar)?
2. Have you had the opportunity to ask questions about your involvement in this study and to receive additional details as requested?
3. Do you agree to participate in this study, with the understanding that you may withdraw from the study at any time or up until May 15, 2023?

If yes:

4. Do you agree to a video and audio recording?
5. Do you agree to be contacted for a follow up interview on Zoom, if necessary? (Provide email address.)
6. Do you agree to the use of direct quotes?

7. Do you agree to allow your anonymized study data to be stored and used for future research as described in the Letter of Information?

8. Would you like a copy of the study results? If yes, where should I send them? (Provide email address.)

At the time of the interview, I will ask for your verbal consent.

APPENDIX D: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Interview Questions

Information about the interview questions:

These questions are designed to gather specific stories of your own experiences of God as a mother. I will show you 16 images that may resonate with you regarding spirituality and mothering and may help you answer the questions. Then I will give you open-ended questions to help guide your thinking. Sometimes I will use other short questions to make sure I understand what you have told me or if I need more information, such as “So, you are saying that ...?”, “Please tell me more,” or “Why do you think that is ...?”. As you answer the questions, please remember that you are free to skip any questions that make you feel uncomfortable or that you do not wish to answer.

As the participant, you should be aware that in the event that the research uncovers activities that would require legal or medical disclosure, the researcher is obligated to contact the proper authorities.

1. Information about you:

- Age bin (ie. 20-24, 25-29, 30-34, 35-39 and so on)
- Marital status
- Ethnicity
- Number and ages of children
- City & province
- Church denomination

2. Take a look at these pictures. If one of them resonates with you in terms of your mothering experience and knowing God, tell me about that. If a picture reminds you of a specific story from your mothering experience, tell me about that.

3. How have you experienced God as a mother?

Have you come to know God in a new way as a mother?

Have you learned new things about God since you became a mother?

Is there anything about mothering that has affected you spiritually?

How has your spiritual life been affected by being a mother?

Other prompts:

- How was that for you?
- Can you give me an example?
- Can you tell me more?
- What was it like to ...”

4. Is there something important we forgot to explore?

5. Is there anything else you would like to tell me?

END

APPENDIX E: PHOTO IMAGES USED FOR PHOTO ELICITATION



Image #1

Photo credits: Amylla Battani (Unsplash)



Image #2

Photo credits: Hu Chen (Unsplash)



Image #3

Photo credits: Alex Pasarelu (Unsplash)



Image #4

Photo credits: Sergui Valenas (Unsplash)



Image #5

Photo credits: Jose Escobar (Unsplash)



Image #6

Photo credits: Moinar Balint (Unsplash)



Image #7

Photo credits: Glen Hodson (Unsplash)



Image #8

Photo credits: Uday Mittal (Unsplash)



Image #9

Photo credits: Caroline Hernandez (Unsplash)



Image #10

Photo credits: Jason Rosewell (Unsplash)



Image #11

Photo credits: Jon Tyson (Unsplash)



Image #12

Photo credits: S&B Vonlanthen (Unsplash)



Image #13

Photo credits: Karena Tess (Unsplash)



Image #14

Photo credits: Elahe Motamedi (Unsplash)



Image #15

Photo credits: Olga Guryanova (Unsplash)



Image #16

Photo credits: Fa Barboza (Unsplash)

APPENDIX F: PARTICIPANTS' RESPONSES TO PHOTO IMAGES

	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8	P9	P10	Totals
Image #1	X	X	X	X	No images	X		X	No images	X	7
Image #2		X				X	X			X	4
Image #3										X	1
Image #4							X				1
Image #5		X				X	X	X			4
Image #6		X				X		X			3
Image #7							X				1
Image #8						X	X				2
Image #9		X								X	2
Image #10		X								X	2
Image #11							X				1
Image #12											0
Image #13		X				X	X				3
Image #14		X				X		X			3
Image #15											0
Image #16							X	X		X	3
Totals	1	8	1	1	0	7	8	5	0	6	

APPENDIX G: POETIC REPRESENTATIONS

The poetic representations are constructed from the interview transcripts of the research participants. Each participant received eight to ten of their own sacred tales.

Participant #1 – P1

Mothering and the Kindness of God

When I see this picture of this woman ready to give birth
 I can actually feel my daughter inside my stomach with her little elbow
 That real life
 I think about the beautiful way God spoke
 And the world was created
 God spoke again
 And all creation came into being

God brings us in – He loves us so much
 God says *you're a part of this*
Work with me in this
This is how I will populate the earth
 There are many other ways God could have done it
 He could just say the word and I'd pop out a baby
 But no –
 God has lovingly done it this way
 It's long
 Nine months
 There's waiting
 There's anticipating

It's a kindness to be part of the process of birthing, giving life
 It's a kindness to be included
 So I can see God
 I just love that
 It's a kindness

Co-labouring and Co-creating with God

It's not just birth
 It's all throughout life
 We are not isolated from God
 We are with God
 Mothering is a way God shows us who God really is
 As I bear children and go through all the trials and joys of that
 I get to see our children grow
 I am actually seeing God, walking with us and loving us
 It's a broad picture of the love of God

I took on the traditional role of mother
 That's what I wanted to do as soon as they came
 It was hardly a sacrifice
 I wanted to do this
 I wanted to be with them
 I put aside things like money for recreation or arts and crafts for myself

It was the kindness of God
 God was just helping me and opening doors for me
 Even now – *oh, thank you!*
 It wasn't a role I took on with grinding teeth
 I did it because I wanted to
 It was this co-existing with God
 Sometimes it was discipline
 But it was always flourishing

It's all God
 How I'm rooted in the Lord
 It's the spirit of thankfulness
 Letting God lead and give me opportunity
 God keeps breathing life into me

We're all co-labouring with God here on earth as kingdom people
 It's not the role at all
 But mothering is a fantastic role

Frustration to Gratitude: Red Boots, Red Boots

One morning when she was a toddler, she wanted to wear red Wellington boots
 I said yes
 But first – you need to get changed
 She must have said *red boots, red boots* fifty times
 I thought I was going to go out of my mind
Red boots, red boots
 She would not give up
 Oh my word!
 I gave in
 For crying out loud, we'll just put pajamas on with boots over top and we'll go outside!

On Sunday this same girl-now-woman was talking with me about faith and Scripture
 She said – *Do you know the children of Israel...*
 She's willing to challenge me
 To ask me if I'm speaking up
 She calls me to account
 Sometimes with words
 But mostly by her life and choices and decisions

I'm glad she's not this compliant mousey girl

I love her directness and boldness
 That's her God-given personality, not mine
 Even though I'm the mother and she's the daughter
 I'm learning from her

Expectant Faith (Attachment to God)

I used to pray
Please, please, please, Lord
 Those were my prayers
 All fear and worry

But now I've more of an expectant faith
 I'm living that now
 As I pray for my son, I have this deep sense of peace that is not mustered up by myself
 It's not positive thinking or rallying myself to hope
 I've wrestled in prayer
 It's like God is saying – *leave it with me.*
Keep trusting

And not just leave it with me and go off
 But it's expectant, hopeful, persistent prayer
 Trusting God in His goodness
 It's God asking me – *do you see the light in your child now?*
 Yes, I do
 It's that sort of confidence in God
 Not in the child
 Or the situation
 It's reminding me that it is God I need to be attached to
 And I'm less anxious

The Joys of Mothering

Giving birth – definitely
 Moments of life when you see them flourish and accomplish something
 Seeing your children love one another
 Encourage one another
 They have each other's backs
 They call each other out
 Even the small things
 Like going to school
 Learning to read and write
 The big things
 Like graduating
 Having your daughter give birth to her own children
 Those are – oh my!
 Those are beautiful moments

Naïve Faith to Mature Trust

I realize that God was with me all the way long

Thank you, God, for that!

We prayed for that and now we're here

It's almost a basking in – to be able to look back at moments through time and see that

God has been so good and faithful

All those years

I wasn't always aware of that

But with increased awareness, experience and maturity

I appreciate God's protection

God's provision

God's sustaining grace

Situations could have been different

Lots of times I was naively trusting

It wasn't necessarily a deep faith or trust that God was going to work it out

But wow – we're here

So yes, it's been a move from naïve faith to mature trust.

Even now I don't see the full picture right now

I'm trusting God that the prayers of the generations go forward

I have to trust that

I will hold on to that expectant faith – regardless

I will keep praying

Lord, you have these children

You will speak to them

You are a God who speaks

Like Isaiah 42:14 says

For a long time, I held my peace.

I have kept myself still and restrained myself

Now I will cry out like a woman in labour

I will gasp and pant

It is Your redemptive love

I see it through my life

That's the gift of living 64 years

Mothering as Sacred

Mothering did feel sacred

As soon as the children were here, it felt sacred

I desired to be a mother

But I had no idea of the gift

And the bond of unity that comes from being a mother

I could not have imagined

It was a sacred call for me

I cannot fully explain or articulate the joy of that

Participant #2 – P2

The Goodness of God

The image of the woman holding her belly
 Reminded me of God's goodness
 Of all the ways I've experienced the pure goodness of God
 Six healthy pregnancies and normal births and so far healthy kids
 It's a testament of God's goodness
 God's undeserving and beautiful gifts to us
 It is pure gift to be pregnant and to bear children
 I feel very humbled and grateful to God for the gift that we have

Those moments of your baby staring up at you with complete adoration
 Or when my little girl just giggles and tells me she loves me completely unprompted
 Or the older boys gut busting a laugh out loud

Motherhood is full of struggle
 But it is also filled with so much sweetness and so much pure joy
 Pure goodness, pure love in such a broken world feels like a gift from God
 Like these drops of God's grace

These glimpses of heaven
 Glimpses that we were created for this

Partnership with God

When I was pregnant
 I felt like I was truly in partnership with God
 Like God planted this baby in me
 But I had a part to play as well
 Nourishing this baby
 Housing this baby in my body
 It really felt like a partnership
 Like we were somehow doing something together
 Me and the Lord

The mom holding the baby's feet
 Reminds me of the incredible responsibility of raising kids
 These little feet remind me of the weight of motherhood
 What a huge, huge responsibility
 Yet the outcome is not our responsibility

This has been really difficult for me
 Will my kids choose Christ?
 Will they be good functioning people?

We have a part to play
 But they have their choices

The outcome is God's responsibility
Not ours

So we put in the hours, the work, and pour out our lives
Yet we don't control what happens
We have to trust God
It is such a responsibility to carry
Yet we don't carry all of it

Mothering as a Sacred Calling

It has been a real journey for me
I used to feel that being in ministry was my most important calling
If I wanted to be a kingdom person, I should be doing ministry
And ministry to lots of people
I loved church planting and the leadership roles I had
A lot of my identity and usefulness was wrapped up in what I was doing at church
I prayed about what needed to be done
I had to take time to be with my family

God pulled me away from that and revealed to me that motherhood is also a kingdom calling
God reminded me that this is enough
That this is significant
This is kingdom work
This matters

It was a hard journey for me
But I experienced so much peace when I got there
So much guilt relieved

My days are full of purpose
It's like God pulled aside a curtain to reveal to me the very spiritual things that are happening every day
It has been a long journey for me

I know it's controversial about mom staying home and what's right, what's wrong
Is there a right?
Is there a wrong?
Honestly, I felt like I was made for this
Like I was settling into something I was created for
Being pregnant sparked this idea that it was sacred
Like I was in partnership with God

The Joys of Mothering

I don't know if I imagined myself having a big family
I thought I would like to have other stuff going on
But no

It has really surprised me how much I just love it
I feel God's delight in that

Honestly, it's all my favourite things
I love teaching the Word
I love discipleship
I love relationships
All the things that I love

And that is what I'm doing
I used to think I had to do it on a much bigger scale
But I get to do it with the people I love the most
So I feel pretty lucky

The Christmas Story and the Vulnerability of Christ

Having babies made the Christmas story come alive for me
The miracle that God who created everything
Became a helpless baby
Who literally nursed at his mother's breast
Could not feed himself
Could not dress himself

There are moments when you're holding a baby
They're covered in poop or vomit
They are so helpless

I never thought of the helplessness of Christ until I had babies
It makes it even more of a mystery and a miracle to me
That God gave up heaven to be helpless and in total need of his mom and dad

My babies gave me a new understanding of God
Absolutely
God gave up so much to be part of his creation

Motherhood and the Church

Motherhood has taught me to do life as the church
That we can't do the Christian life alone

I remember one morning at Bible study
I just cried the whole morning
I was so tired
Another mother who I didn't know well just handed me a \$50 bill
The Lord knows I'm not going to make you a meal
But order yourself some pizza tonight
Take a break

I will never forget that

She was also at her wit's end
 But she was there for me
 I wasn't alone

My Own Limitations & Spiritual Creativity

Mothering has taught me my own limitations
 Where I just end
 Where I have to trust the Lord to step in
 The nights when you're awake holding a crying baby who just won't sleep
 Or when the kids are older
 What to say, what not to say
 When to talk, when not to talk
 When to put your foot down, when to give a little leeway
 I am constantly at the end
 I really don't know what to do
 What to say

In those moments, I ask the Holy Spirit for supernatural wisdom
 To be reminded of something
 For spiritual creativity

Things will come into my head
 Like, oh! I should make this kid do some chores with me
 Ideas that I hadn't thought of before
 Great ideas inspired by the Spirit
 I'm grateful to the Lord for spiritual creativity

Knowing God in The Surrender and Suffering of Mothering:

My house is never as clean as I want it to be
 Even if I throw up a chore chart
 It never stays as organized as I want it to be
 Yet somehow God shows up

There is constant surrender
 We are not in control
 We have to constantly hold these kids with open hands
 Maybe this is unique about mothering – because we don't have a sense of ownership
 Even though biologically our child is ours
 They're not really
 A child is our flesh and blood
 And I give my blood, sweat, and tears
 So to surrender something, someone like that
 Feels like it physically goes against something in me

I'm a pretty faith-filled person
 I've never experienced a lot of fear
 I'm pretty comfortable in front of crowds

I'm a pretty confident person
 But I have never experienced fear as I have in motherhood
 Fear that they won't be with me for eternity
 Fear that they will be empty because they don't know their Creator
 Fear that they won't know their purpose or value or identity
 Fear that they won't be grounded
 All those things

In the early years I would have tried to fake it til I make it
 But that is tiring
 And not sustainable

The Holy Spirit has helped me to be honest and vulnerable through mothering
 It is the work of Jesus, making us more like Himself

You can go to Bible studies and listen to podcasts and try to create ways to grow
 But motherhood has done that in a way that you couldn't create for yourself
 The sort of work the Spirit does – as far as character development – can only happen in
 the slow and long road
 Like motherhood
 There are some things you can only learn in suffering of motherhood
 In that struggle and love and constantly coming to the end of yourself
 We have no choice but to cling to Jesus

Motherhood keeps me on my knees
 It pulls me back into the Word because I wouldn't survive without it
 If I'm eating the Word and spending time in the presence of God
 Then I have a bigger picture of God's love for me
 That God is with us
 That we are in God's presence
 Motherhood helps me to keep abiding and keep in step with the Spirit
 Obviously not all the time
 I'm tired sometimes
 But it pulls me back to God

God Meeting Me in the Anguish of Mothering: My Son & Malaria

When we were in Africa, my husband and 3 of the boys got malaria
 One boy had it so terribly that at one point
 He was unresponsive
 We had to rush him on boda-boda to the hospital
 In the middle of the night

I remember the rawness of crying out to God in that moment
 There's a depth of anguish that a mother feels
 There's no other relationship that can explain that kind of love and desperation

I felt like God met me in that truly horrible moment

In all its rawness and anguish
I experienced the goodness of God in a truly terrible place

I can't explain it
I can't call it sweetness
I don't know what you can call it
It's so raw but there's something good about it

My View of God

I used to think of life in terms of black and white
I like to follow rules
I like to know what's expected of me so I can do it

But over the last 12 years, God has become so much more gracious t
Than I could have ever imagined
He is more loving
The things that I thought I could rely on God for is just so much more
More than just the big stuff (like thousands of dollars so you can move to Africa)

But motherhood has helped me learn that you can rely on God for the little stuff
All the things
That God is not just there for the big miracle moments
But that God is literally there moment by moment
Breath by breath
God is there
And God is at work

God and Mothers

I have a high view of women
I always thought and felt that God used women in incredible ways
Mothering just affirms that
I just knew that God loved and valued women
Even in my silly – oh, I'm going to change the world phase – somehow God did use me

I feel like I know God
And I feel loved by God

Participant #3 – P3

Mothering: Vulnerability & Suffering

I felt anxious for this pregnant woman
 I felt her vulnerability
 The reality that everything could go wrong
 That you have such little control over so many things yet to come
 There's a sense of not wanting to get too excited or too happy
 Because things could go wrong
 Be prepared that things may not be good
 Be ready to deal with hard things, disappointments, changes
 That things feel out of control

That's a good introduction to mothering
 This element of fear

I went through the journey of becoming a mother here in the north
 I was exposed to a lot of grief and loss and trauma
 There was this sense that life is unpredictable and out of control and cruel
 I don't know at what point I will be the mother who suffers

My geographical location means that there is no help on the way
 If there's an emergency, I am on my own
 If someone chokes or falls or there's an accident or a fire
 Like, during the time my husband has been in the city, most nights I am reviewing –
 How am I going to get three kids out of this house if there's a fire?
 It is up to me to have a plan and to handle this
 And what if I can't do that?

I wasn't a highly anxious person before becoming a mother
 Not having control would not have been a stressor

But there is a sense of the inevitableness of suffering and sorrow
 A sense of being exposed
 That goes along with mothering

To be a mother is to suffer
 It's the vulnerability
 Opening yourself to suffering in a whole new way

Pregnancy: God With Us

It was the beginning of having to surrender
 Like, I just really hope God is out there!
 That I'm not alone in this experience

My heart is so wrapped up in this little person's life
 It's a whole different kind of love that I hadn't experienced before

Loving and being responsible to protect and care for
 These tiny, vulnerable, innocent creatures
 It feels like all of a sudden
 The risks are so much higher than before
 It feels essential
 That I am able to protect and provide for them

Then –
 A realization that I can do everything within my power
 And it still might not be enough

So –
 Clinging to this hope that there is a Mother God out there
 Who loves this child
 And loves me
 That She will be there for us
 In whatever comes up

Paradigm Shift: God as Wizard to God-with-us

There's been a shift in my spirituality
 I grew up with God almost as a genie or a wish-fulfiller
 That I would pray for things and God would grant me whatever I needed
 Then coming here to the North, I realized that everyone is praying for protection
 It's such a spiritually connected community
 Everyone is praying for the health of their loved ones, for protection, for the Creator to
 take care of them
 And still –
 Terrible things happen
 So why would I think that somehow God is going to favour me?
 There's just so much suffering
 Why not us? Why should we not be a part of that?
 Why should I even ask for that?

God as wizard is an alarming idea
 Like, how can God be a wizard for me but not for these other people?
 God as wizard brings up a whole set of other problems that I can't get my head around

My view of God is still a work in progress
 I would like to believe in a God who intervenes in people's lives in life-and-death
 moments
 And prevents suffering
 And protects people from hardship
 Sometimes God does that
 But lots of times, God doesn't do that
 God is not protecting people in the way that I think people deserve protection

I am shifting from asking God to do things for us to asking God to be with us

I still ask God for help all the time
 When I'm leaving the house, driving the kids, for people I work with
 I pray for wisdom and awareness of my surroundings

I still believe that we're God's people and that God loves us and cares for us
 But I don't believe it the same
 It's more that I believe that God is with us
 God is with those who are suffering
 God is with us in times of rejoicing
 God loves us and is happy with us
 In times of suffering, God is with us
 Mourning and hurting with us

God is with us
 God is the One who enters in and joins us in our suffering
 The presence of God feels like hope
 It means I worry less
 This is the only way I can understand how God as a loving presence is even possible

A Call for Help: The Bed Bugs

Just this fall, we had a bed bug infestation
 I felt like I was going to lose my mind
 The added work and stress and expenses
 And it goes on and on and on
 I wish I could believe in the God that some of our relatives believe in
 Like – *In the name of Jesus, I command the bed bugs to leave!*
You have no place here!
You cannot stay!
 Like God is a wizard
 I would like that to be true
 It would be very helpful

I would even just like God to make the things work that I'm doing
 I'm not even asking for a miracle
 I'm not asking for magic
 I'm just asking for all my hard work to pay off

I have had to shift to acceptance of my circumstances
 And gratitude for the good things in our life
 That right now things feel crappy but they won't always be this way
 This is temporary
 There is still so much goodness and beauty
 God knows how hard this is and that I can't get through this unless I have some help

So, please remind me of the beauty
 Let's get outside
 I need to feel connected to the Earth or to God or to my children in a positive way

The Expanded Mother Heart

The pain of existence is just much more difficult now
 I see my children in the little children I work with
 They are working to make sense of things and how to survive significant losses
 Or the adults who are struggling with self-destructive or harmful behaviors
 I think of them as 3 or 4 years olds
 Little children who had been hurt
 Agghhh, of course!
 Life is just really hard and painful and unfair
 It's overwhelming

My sense of compassion and empathy have increased
 I value life more
 These individuals are more precious or sacred than I thought before

But that realization also makes me want to shut life out
 Like the earthquake
 I don't want to hear about it
 It's just too much
 There are protective or defense mechanisms I've started to use
 I'll make assumptions or come up with explanations to explain away tragedy

I know it's not fair or even accurate
 But it's a way to protect myself against the realization that this could be any of us

When we're out of the heat-of-the-moment power struggles with heightened emotions
 I look at my kids and feel so much love for them
 Then I have a sense that that is how God feels about us

That's how God feels for every one of us
 There is this sense of shared struggle and shared humanity
 This is how God feels for those who are the least loveable
 And today, that might be me

The Joy of Mothering: Being Present (Or Not)

Having children is worth it
 Not that your life won't be fulfilling
 Or you won't be satisfied if you don't get this experience
 But for me, having these children brings so much
 It's such a joy to know them
 To be a part of their lives
 To watch them grow and learn
 I feel their sense of wonder and enthusiasm for life
 Their ability to be in the moment and just take everything in
 There's so many beautiful moments if you can actually pay attention

I have choices
 I can lie down with them at night and be fixated on the possibility of a bed bug in the room
 Or I can snuggle with them
 Have a little chat
 Be with them in the moment

Being fully present is a choice that I can make or not make
 When I make that choice and choose to be fully present with them and enjoy them
 Then I am overwhelmed with gratitude
 The gift they are to me

And other days I miss out
 I am driven by fear and anxiety
 I am not present with them or myself or God
 Just an impatient mom who is snapping all the time and hustling around the house

Children and God

I'm introducing them to God as Creator
 Not so much biblical stories
 (We were talking about Easter and Jesus dying on the cross
 I still don't really get this because I can't explain it to them)
 But the Earth and nature
 The God who made everything

We pray our nightly prayers and ask God to be with those who are suffering and to bring helpers
 I think what we are asking for is openness to the Spirit
 That God would bring helpers in times of need
 Sometimes I want to self-protect by disconnecting from suffering

But my kids will say – we need to pray for this person!

This summer, a woman in a wheelchair with her grandson on her lap hit a bump and went flying
 She was knocked unconscious
 The kids were there and saw this
 For months, my daughter wanted to pray for this woman and her grandson
 So we prayed that the doctors would be able to help her
 And that someone would help the grandson understand what happened

Kids are curious and like little blank slates
 So I don't want to teach them the same things I learned without questioning it
 I'm doing my own deconstruction to rethink God
 How God operates in the world and within us

I feel this responsibility to pass on some kind of spirituality to my kids

So they don't feel alone in the world
 So they become good people

Mother God & the Black Madonna

The book *Mother God* is all about God as our Mother
 The artist paints beautiful pictures of mothers and children
 Then the author uses Scriptures about God as Mother
 I just love it
 You would love it

God could be mother or father
 Male or female
 I don't really care
 Because I don't think God is one or the other
 But God as Mother is connected to the body and physicality
 Growing up with God as Father was detached from our bodies
 High up in heaven
 As a ruler
 At a distance
 Maybe angry
 It's helpful for me to have a completely different picture of God
 (And it has nothing to do with my earthly father
 He's wonderful!
 Although very cerebral and in his head)

The Divine Feminine, connected to the Earth as a bringer of life is really beautiful

It's easier to talk about God as a Being than an "it"
 We could talk about God as Spirit or a multiple of spirits
 That could work
 But for the kids and I, it's helpful to have an actual image

I've been drawn to the Black Madonna
 Images of God that are not white
 Because who has suffered most in the world?
 Women of colour
 And to think that God is with them, that God could look like them
 It's a way of seeing God as a God of justice
 A God who is trustworthy
 Growing up, the pictures of God were white and male
 I didn't get the same sense of God getting it
 That God is with us to suffer
 But this image helps me feel more connected

This idea of the Divine Feminine makes the relationship between us as humans and the
 Earth and God a lot smaller and closer
 More connectivity

I feel a lot of solidarity with other women
 I feel a lot of solidarity with God
 I have a sense of how big God is
 To be able to have orchestrated this all and made it all and love it all
 And to continue to want to be with us
 Even though it's terrible

After being nasty to my kids all day, I feel really unworthy
 Like, *oh God – you must look at me and think*
Why are you so mean to these little kids?
Why are you yelling at them for not doing things as quickly as you would like them to?

Then
 I have a sense that God loves me
 God has compassion on me
 God is with me

The Embodiment of Mothering: Deconstruction and Reconstruction

Becoming a mother coincided with reconstruction of my faith in a more embodied way
 Previous to being a mother, I was able to be very disconnected to my body
 As a mother, it becomes impossible not to feel about your body
 There's lots of choices how you feel about your body, but the reality is
 You are so much more connected to your body now

Christina Cleveland in her book *God as a Black Woman* talks about the while male sky
 God
 God is at the top of the hierarchy and white males are near the top
 But even white males are scared that God hates them
 That they are not good enough for God
 And they're at the top of hierarchy!
 The closest you could be to God!

It comes down to this profound sense that God is actually anti-human
 That resonates with me

Becoming a mother and feeling so vulnerable and having such compassion
 There's a sense that God really, really is with me
 Through the anxiety and significant insomnia
 Through physical issues and medical issues
 Pregnancy, childbirth
 Recognizing that God is with me
 God gets this

God is glorified through pregnancy and childbirth somehow
 God created our bodies and these are beautiful things
 I grew up believing that our bodies were a kind of shameful thing
 Pregnancy, menstruation, puberty, sex, pregnancy, childbirth, nakedness

Was all kind of shameful
Where did I get that from?

I got it from my religious upbringing
That was very anti-body
Anti-woman

I reject that now

I think that God absolutely loves women
That God is woman as much as God is anything else
That God is as much woman as man
If God is anything beyond spirit

Participant #4 – P4

Pregnancy and Labour: Participation in Something Divine

The morning I went into labour
 I had been slowly reading through the Bible
 I was in Isaiah at the time
 I landed on this passage:
*That we can labour in vain
 but it's God who brings life*

That was so strangely timely for me!
 I sat there and mediated as I went through the contractions
 It was a kind of marvelling to me
 This strange intersection
 That I have this invitation for participation in something divine
 That the Creator is creating and bringing into being this human
 But somehow I get to participate

That was really wild
 Women do a ton of work in labour
 But it is God who makes that labour worthwhile
 All the suffering and pain is not in vain
 It leads to life

I felt very seen and known by God that morning
 This realization of my smallness and finiteness
 Recognizing my position in the grand scheme
 And God's power
 What a powerful life force God is

Becoming a Mother: A Wonder & A Challenge

I loved the miracle that was happening
 I was full of wonder as I stared at my belly
 How is this possible?
 Yes, there was my participation and my husband's
 My body knew how to put a baby together
 But it would not have been possible without God
 God was breathing life and forming this incredible little miracle in me
 Amazing
 The most supernatural experience I've ever had – three times over!
 How crazy is that?

At the same time...
 The challenge was not feeling myself
 That separation between pre-baby me and pregnancy me was starting
 I felt like I was losing myself
 I couldn't be sure of myself with all the hormones and tiredness

Especially when they were newborns and I was nursing

I planned the whole day around naps and eating schedules
How I live my life is literally given to my family
This was the biggest difficulty

I noticed myself becoming a lot more jealous and envious of my husband
Like, do you realize how much agency you have?
How much freedom you have?
You get to choose how you want to live your day!
This frustration has come up

Mothering & Connection with God

I was someone who is quite impulsive to take action
Get the job done
Fix things
Those can be good desires
But they can also be done in vain with no good fruit

It's the vine imagery again
That we can't do anything good apart from God
The connection is all about being connected to that life force
That is the only way real fruit can come

I can easily deceive myself that good works equals fruitfulness
Through that first pregnancy, God taught me it's more about this connection to the vine
Connection to that life force
This sense of abiding
Constant connection with God
Like communion
Constant mindfulness and surrender
Walking with God

It might not look as productive as my eyes would want
But if God produces life, then it has to come from God
With my own effort, I'm going to be spread pretty thin and not satisfied

Newborns and God's Steadfast Love

Newborns have taught me about being fully dependent on God
Just seeing their neediness
For me it was a small glimpse of the kind of love that God has for me
That greater parental love
Having babies was a small picture of that care

As I see my kids – even with disobedience and choosing their own way and different personalities –
There is a sense of abiding love for them that is ongoing

That is not going anywhere

Sometimes I have this perspective
 That God wants me to earn my place with Him
 I think God will be like – *oh no! You're like that!*
 But no – God is in this for me
 To carry me along the way
 Adoption is not a frivolous loosey-goosey-kind of holding on to me
 It is this steady sort of love

I'm still very much human so I can be flighty in moments
 But there is a steadiness where I can breathe deeper
 Rest easier
 Knowing that I am held by God
 Knowing that my life is sustained by Him
 That I am truly adopted by Him
 I can come back to that steadiness

The Sacrifice of Mothering

Yes, it feels like a sacrifice
 Very very much
 Giving up my comfort and pleasure
 Desires for education
 All those needs and desires I have set aside
 Because these humans are dependent on me
 All the necessities of keeping them clean and fed and cared for
 I can't just be like – *oh! I'll deal with you tomorrow when I feel like it!*
Good luck today!
 And the formation work –
 Building that security and love
 That strong framework and understanding of who God is

Those things need to be imprinted early
 Especially hearing from others who have wounds from their moms
 So what does it mean to be a faithful mom?
 Who helps their kids to flourish?
 It feels like a weighty responsibility

But it's also where God does His most good hard work in me
 There's something about those early years
 That life is not about me
 I choose to be a mother
 But God allows me to participate again
 In the suffering and selflessness and sacrifice
 I needed to understand the kind of sacrificial love that Jesus has
 And how much I need Jesus
 Mothering reveals so much of my selfishness and jealousy

You can pretend you're a pretty great person until you have to care for somebody

The Presence of God and the Invitation to Rest:

I think God would say – *I'm with you for the journey*

I think He would say – *you can sleep!*

We'll take care of that tomorrow

There are so many things I worry about

Sometimes I think God invites me to rest

That He is here today and that He is in it for the journey

God is here for the whole process

I can be self-critical

But He's not like – *Oh, she messed this one up!*

I gotta take off and find a better daughter!

Instead, God is with me for the journey

When I think about it

I really do have this sense of abiding

That God is here for the long haul

It makes me expectant

To watch for Him

To see how He is with me

Because if I can't find hope in this mundane everyday life

What hope is there?

If it's only when there's a big platform for me

Then it's not real

So there's an expectancy to see how God shows up

The Christmas Story: A Bigger Picture of God & the Human Experience

During Advent the last couple years, I have thought about Immanuel – God coming in the flesh

John 1:14 says *the Word became flesh and dwelt among us*

I've meditated on that sense of humanity with wonder

I had a Christmas baby

And it was during his pregnancy that I began to marvel at that more

Why would Jesus come as a baby?

And the real multi-faceted humanity of Jesus

He was depending on his mom for nutrients inside her body

That He was fully dependent on His mom's milk

She was changing his diapers

He chose to come dependent on other humans

How much more dependent could you be?

That was really striking to me

He could have come a different way

During that pregnancy, I probably shifted in how I look at God
 I used to think of God as very stoic
 Maybe detached, disconnected
 But not intimately connected with us
 God becoming human and very close
 Makes me think that God is not afraid of my emotions
 That He is not put off by my personality
 Or just humanity in general
 Because He choose to come that way
 Though there's so much that He wants to transform in us, it's not like –
oh, you're this yucky piece of dirt that I decided to love!
 It's like – *I created you!*
I intentionally made you and gave you this human body
All those things and emotions

I sometimes imagine God with this kind of stingy look
 But my picture of God has become much more multi-dimensional
 More complex, more intriguing
 A lot more mystery and questions
 I'm just curious to understand this God
 Who would have us come in such a way
 And that He would choose to come in this way
 So much more mystery to chew on
 The mystery excites me
 It keeps me pursuing God
 It also scares me at times –
 that I might go off the deep end and have an unorthodox view of God
 But I think it's like the word you said – expanded
 It makes me think of the Psalms where it says – *You've made a spacious place for me*
 It makes me think that mentally, spiritually, emotionally
 There is a more spacious place to explore and discover who God is

God: Housed in a Woman's Body

He could have chosen a different way!
 But He chose a woman
 That God would be dependent on a woman's body
 That seems really surprising to me
 It causes me to wonder – why?
 I don't have answers for that

I think if women are questioning what God thinks of women
 Look to Mary
 She has the closest and most intimate relationship with God that any human will ever
 have
 That's weird to say out loud
 That no human
 Let alone any woman

Would have the kind of relationship that Mary had with God

So women can participate with the divine
I don't know how to articulate that
But I'd love to meditate more on that

My Little Girl's Birth: The Restful Presence of God

She was three days late
Which felt like an eternity to me
I tried all the things – eating spicy foods, walking miles and miles
Even this YouTube video of a doula who basically challenged my perspective of doing things
She encouraged these stretches and then a resting time
She said it would bring on labour

So I tried it
Did the stretches
Then laid down for a couple of hours
My water broke!

During this time I had been asking for prayer because I didn't have a lot left in me
It was as if God was saying again –
Yes, I just need you to rest
And then we will get this baby coming

Now that I think about it
I had this peace and awareness and energy that was really strange
I felt really present
With God and with my husband
We were both in it together

Of course, it was still painful and not easy
It was stressful in the hospital
They call that night “the night” because there were eight babies born
It was the classic – there's no room for you in the inn!
Plus we were masked up

There was so much
I could have easily said that this is too much for me
But I felt the steady presence of God with me
The other births were foggy and I was just out of it
But I had energy and peace and awareness for this birth
I have so many more memories of this birth
There was a different kind of attentiveness
It was definitely this sense of power beyond my own
And rest
That seems to be a common theme

Letting Go: Cooperation with God

Over time I'm being reminded that they are God's kids
That I am a steward
I get to participate in these gifts that are dropped into our life
But ultimately they are His

I'm preparing to let go of them for the rest of my life
Not that they will be cut off or anything
But a sense of resting and continually saying – *ok, they're Yours*
It's so easy to be like – *They're mine! They're mine!*
And to try to get them to do what I want

It's easy to tricky myself in believing that they are made in my image
Instead of made in God's image

I'm just scratching the surface of that though
But there is this continual letting go and resting
Because they are God's first and foremost

Participant #5 – P5

Pregnancy & Mothering: The Joyful Surprise & Sense of Purpose

I really loved being pregnant

I enjoyed it every time

I loved having the child in my belly, feeling it move

Being a mother seemed to be the fulfillment of what it was to be me

I was a mother

I was female

I was capable of carrying a child

It felt like the right thing for me to be doing

It was one of the things I had full confidence about

It felt like this was meant to be

I felt comfort and contentment in that

It was a new journey

All very exciting

I remember holding the baby for the first time and thinking –

Oh my goodness! I get a baby too!

I was just happy that the pain had ended

I never, never had any second thoughts about it

Or regrets

Or any of those things

I didn't even expect to get married

Or perhaps even being a mother

I didn't play with babies or kids or do that kind of thing

In fact, I never changed a diaper til I had my own child!

Mothering gave me purpose

I was looking for that at the time

I was feeling like I needed something

My children only have one mother

That's the job that only I can do

I've been looking for the those in life that only I can do

Those are the purposeful things for me

Like mothering

Mothering: Unconditional Love and Investment

I remember with the second child, thinking to myself

How can I possibly have room to love a second child?

I can't love anybody less and I can't love another person as much as this person!

The love aspect is mind blowing

I don't know that I could have experienced that any other way

I imagine if you adopt, you could also have that experience
I don't doubt that

I loved this child
It was unconditional love
Because I wasn't getting anything back from this child
There's nursing and cuddles and all that but ...

A lot of people will say that a mother's love for the child is greater than any love they've
had in the past
That shocked me
I didn't think it could be possible

But, ultimately there is something about that
The mother-child bond is different than a spouse
A spousal relationship is an equal bond and you're working together
You get to the same level of love

But the minute that child is born
You as the mother are the only person who can provide that sort of love
You're the only person who is the mother
There's some kind of destiny to it
I don't know what the right word is

It's the investment
You're invested in the outcome
You may be a little invested in the prayer for Mary Jane as a missionary in Africa
Sure, I'll pray
But oh boy – I am so much more invested now
I'm going to follow through and pray some more
I'm so invested in the outcome of mothering

Mothering and God's Perspective: Love and Vulnerability

Having children makes you able to see things a little bit from God's perspective
Because God creates us a child of God
And then we have this child, you begin to see things differently
Until then, you've only seen things as a child
But now you're seeing things from the other side
Just a little bit, very small
But it's that unconditional love that you have for the child
You would do anything for that child
We've heard stories of mothers who have done exceptional, incredible things for their
children
You begin to see that

I've gained greater understanding of the love of God
The discipling, raising, leading, guiding, letting go

All that God does with us
 God lets us choose
 We've got free will and the freedom to choose
 Even though that hurts God – if we choose against God
 That's part of parenting, of being a mother
 The rejection will happen
 Whether it's not eating peas at dinner or something bigger
 You get that perspective
 So it's not only the love, but mothering is helping me understand a little bit more what it
 is like to create a thinking person and allow them the freedom to choose what they want

I think God would notice that I spent a lot of time with my kids
 I had (and still do) have a good relationship with them
 I feel like they're open to me
 I don't think you can get quality time without quantity time
 And I made sure we had quantity time
 Recently I've thought of that in context with God
 Maybe it's true or maybe God doesn't conform to our norms
 But with children, when you spend time with them, it moves into richer conversation
 Where it's not about things, but about ideas
 Maybe God is similar
 God is dealing with humans after all

Knowing God: Prayer in the Middle of the Night

Certainly going to God for help – my Rescuer
 Leaning in on God
 That is vital
 I couldn't have been a mother otherwise
 My Guide – in deciding how to educate my children
 Preparing curriculum and whether to put them in high school or not
 That was something I definitely went to God about
 God as my Preserver!

I had a conversation with my aunt
 I was complaining a lot about getting up in the middle of the night to pee while I was
 pregnant
 I resented it a little
 I remember being at a Bible study and – *oh! Please pray for me!*
 I'm sure the other mothers were rolling their eyes
Yes, we'll pray for you

Then my aunt said to me (she had four kids) – *it's the perfect time to pray*
 Of course, I didn't really want to hear that but it was true
 So I adopted that – I'd get up and I pray
 During those midnight and middle of the night feedings
 It was interesting that she passed that along to me
 I liked that piece of advice

A lot of time if I wake up in the middle of the night
 (unless I'm throwing up or something!)
 I believe that God wants me to pray
 So I won't just lie there and try to go back to sleep
 But 90% of the time I get up and pray
 I feel like – *why would I be waking up in the middle of the night unless there's something to pray about?*
 So I pray and then I'm able to sleep

Mothering led me to a very rich prayer life

If I'm honest, I would say my spiritual life is less now than when I was mothering full time
 Maybe as you become older, you become more self-sufficient
 You rely on yourself more
 Maybe I will disagree with that tomorrow!

At the same time, you watch God move in your life and be there for you and answer prayer
 It strengthens your faith
 I had heard stories from other people of God working in their life
 They always encouraged me
 But now I have seen God work in my own life
 That's very powerful

Mothering: Understanding and Empathy

Mothering has definitely changed me
 Absolutely
 I think mothering makes you more –
 Understanding
 Tolerant

It definitely makes you step back and ask
Well, what else is going on in this situation?
What's the back story?

There's more to life than just what I see
 You realize that there is more to whoever this person is in front of you
 Mothering helps you to be more understanding
 More empathetic or sympathetic

God's Guidance: Quit Homeschooling or Not?

I really struggled whether to quit home schooling one of my children
 I journaled and prayed a lot then
 I came to a decision and had a real conviction about it
 It was more than – well, that seems like a good idea

That conviction held me through

I didn't realize it then
 But it also helped me through subsequent decisions
 When things didn't look like that was the right decision for that person
 It just felt right
 Maybe that's not the right word
 I didn't doubt it though – it was very clear
 And a kind of peace and release from worry came with it

God's Peace and Presence: Motorbike Story

When my son purchased a motorbike
 It was very stressful for me whenever he was late
 I would wait up and journal

I remember one night –
 I got up in the middle of the night and just cried out
I can't live like this anymore, Lord!
You've got to do something!

God just reached down and let me release it
 God gave me a peace about it
 Even though my son still wasn't home
 I didn't have any more worry or anxiety
 Then I was able to sleep

It was one of the more dramatic spiritual experiences I've had
 It was almost a physical experience

Gratitude and peace in our relationship – that was the response
 I was so thankful God heard and answered my prayer
 And gave me peace and contentment
 It didn't mean that my son was going to be physically fine
 It was like – it's going to be ok because God is with me
 That was the answer to the prayer

There are times when I'm not hearing from God
 Not that I doubt that God is with me
 There are times I wonder why don't I feel you?
 Or hear you?
 But if you ask me – do I not believe that God is here?
 Maybe once or twice I've thought that
 But so very rare – in the mothering aspect of things

The Sorrow and Cost of Mothering:

There is definitely sorrow in that parting of mothering
 Mothering comes in and it's surprising

And you continue to mother
Then they leave

It is definitely a grieving process
You lose the mothering and you lose them a bit
God fills the gap – not right away
Mothering gives you this perspective on time
That time doesn't go on forever
But to enjoy the moment, the present
Because this moment isn't going to be there again
Maybe time alone would give you that as you walk through life
It's the kind of thing that everybody learns
But mothering has definitely taught me that

Home education was a big aspect of spending time with them
Every morning we'd have a quiet time together
We'd read and discuss and pray
It cost financially – a whole salary actually
It will probably keep costing

But I have everything I need so it's not really a cost
So what did it cost me?
I don't know
I don't think it hurt me in any way
It always felt like a win-win

At the same time, I know my kids less and less
I'll be honest
I know them less now than I did
They get married and leave you
That's part of the purpose
So now I pray for them as they parent or live adult lives

Spirituality of Mothering: The Love Connection

CBC Tapestry's show host interviewed Nalini Nadkarni – a canopy biologist
She talks about the spirituality of trees
Her definition of spirituality is this:
A sense of meaningful connection to something other than ourselves

Mothering comes on suddenly even though you have nine months to prepare
It is surprising, overwhelming, and much more consuming than you expect
It is the end of pain
And at the same time – a beginning, a child's birth
At the time it seems innocent, natural, and inexpensive
But that love that has begun is unending ... who can know what it is going to entail?
Your heart's capacity grows and changes
And you learn to hold them lightly, to let them be them, and eventually to let them go

Is that a spiritual experience?
 God is love and we only love because God loves us
 We experience God's love and translate that love to our children
 Mothering at its core is simply loving the children in your care

I guess God meets us wherever

The spiritual aspect only seems to come to mind when I meet challenges or need peace
 or guidance

Mostly though I just lived and did and glided along in the love of God
 Just how my children lived and thrived in our household
 They understood the expectations and boundaries, knew the edges
 They enjoyed the security, comfort, fun, and excitement of being in our family
 There wasn't a striving or anxiety – especially in those younger years
 (Or is that my rose-tinted glasses speaking?)
 We strove to have God at the center of everything
 Most of the time it was a gentle, joy-filled experience

If spirituality is a connection with something other than ourselves
 Then my connection to God is undeniably spiritual
 And by deduction, my connection through Him with my children could be considered a
 spiritual experience
 I can only love because God loves me
 So that "love connection" with my children could also be considered spiritual!

Oh my goodness!
 I think I'm lost in swirls of reasoning.

Participant #6 – P6

Fear to Faith: Expanded View of God

I grew up Pentecostal – hellfire and brimstone

Holiness and legalism

I thought God only loved me when I was behaving as I should

At age 31, I discovered God loves me no matter what

That I can do nothing to make God love me more

That in spite of all my failures, God continues to love and bless me

That the grace He has for me is so abundant

It doesn't depend on good behavior or being perfect

I never thought I would be married or pregnant

So I never thought I would look like this woman with her belly

Then I was pregnant with twins and had a huge belly

Just looking at this picture and I can feel those babies in my womb again

I had a lot of fear when I was pregnant

For a few reasons – pretty significant infertility and then a second trimester miscarriage

I thought we were doomed when it came to having children

So much fear

It was by far the most palpable and salient emotion I experienced

But I read Psalm 139 every single night of my pregnancy

You created my inmost being, You knit me together in my mother's womb

I praise You because I am fearfully and wonderfully made

It was really special

As much as I had fear, I also had great faith

In large part, it came from my husband, my parents, my aunt and uncle, and a pastor

Their faith held me up when I couldn't muster my own faith

They prayed for me when I couldn't pray or didn't have the words

Their faith naturally transferred to my own faith

Knowing that God was knitting together our two little girls inside me

Felt so unfathomable and incomprehensible

I was just in amazement

It felt like God was taking care of us

It was almost too big for me to conceptualize

I was just wowed

That feeling still remains with me today

I cannot believe that He has blessed me with this life

Amazement

Then at age 36, I experienced an abundance of God's grace being pregnant and having two healthy babies

One's middle name is Grace and other's middle name is Faith

Besides salvation, these two girls are our greatest gifts

It was grace upon grace upon grace
 Gift upon gift upon gift
 And that it has nothing to do with me!
 That it is God's goodness

Mothering has expanded my understanding of God's grace
 When you layer that fear on top of the God-will-bless-you-if-you-have-enough-faith –
 Hmmm.
 It's total opposite to what I experienced
 I actually really struggled with faith
 I had so much fear
 Yet God blessed me anyways

My prayers used to be out of a place of fear
 They sounded like – God, please don't let this happen, please don't let that happen,
 please, please protect them!
 Like a begging
 But now they are out of a place of faith
 They sound more like – I trust You
 You love them even more than I do
 I put my faith in You
 That would be the biggest change in me spiritually

The Faith Learned in Mothering Spilled Over:

That faith has spilled over to everything
 I've had zero fear during the pandemic
 Even with the conspiracy theories and pandemic craziness for the last 3 years – I've
 never bought into that for a second
 The whole world could burn down around us and I have total faith
 Honestly, I have been delivered from that place of fear
 I put my faith in you, Lord, and that You will take care of me no matter what happens

I know my task for the teenage years is to maintain my position of faith instead of fear
 Every single one of my relatives has struggled so I know what lies ahead
 I learned that from my father
 He was a wonderful spiritual man
 When he became palliative April 2020 and my mother and I had to tell him he was dying
 You know what he said – well, that's disappointing
 Later I said – *Dad, I kinda expected a different reaction from you*
How do you really feel?
 He said – *dear, it's totally out of my control*
I can't control if I live or die
But I can control if I have faith in God or not
I've had faith since 1978 when I got saved
So I just put my faith in the Lord

And I thought – *that's the secret right now not to live in fear or anxiety*
 It's bigger than biblical knowledge
 It's more than a feeling
 It's experiential
 Like believing in the absence of evidence
 Which I guess is the essence of faith

Mothered by Jesus/Holy Spirit:

I've never thought of being mothered by God
 God seems a little ... not the overlord ... but ...
 It's not that I have a problem with God as Father
 I have had a wonderful period in my life experiencing God as Father that has stayed with me
 But God as Mother is not resonating for me

I would say I have felt mothered by Jesus and the Holy Spirit
 There's a tenderness there
 If you can picture those images of Jesus where He's got that longing in His face for you
 And the open arms – *come here!*
 That's very mothering to me.

When my daughter was in the hospital and had surgery when she was two,
 It was really touch-and-go
 But looking back I was very much sustained and held up by the Holy Spirit or Jesus
 We don't know if this kid was going to get better
 But I had peace
 I felt sheltered, nurtured, cared for

When my dad died in June of 2020, the early part of the pandemic
 I felt very cared for by the Lord
 At that point, very mothered
 It made me feel like a child – nothing to worry about or be afraid of
 I was being taken care of
 And everything was going to be ok
 Just like I say to my kids
 I was somehow gathered up in the arms of Jesus
 I knew I was in His care and that nothing was going to touch me

I grew up in the Pentecostal Church and it was very heavy on Satan and demonic spirits
 and attacks
 So I developed this awful fear at night when Andrew would go to night shift
 Just tortured and afraid that they were demonic spirits ready to attack me
 I was so unsettled
 Long story short, God completely delivered me from that fear
 It was like a big image of Jesus outside my house with these big, outstretched arms
I've got you
You do not have to fear

*Nothing is going to get you
 I live in you, around you, I'm a part of you
 You are abiding in me and nothing can get you
 It is like that eternal image of a mother caring for her child
 I've never thought of this before
 The mothering side of the Lord
 But it's huge*

Breastfeeding: The Beauty and Power of the Female Body

Breastfeeding was my favourite part of early motherhood
 (I'm going to gush!)
 There is nothing like skin-on-skin breastfeeding
 My breasts were their kryptonite
 They were powerless against the breast!
 They're crying – give them the breast
 They're hungry – breast
 Tired – breast
 Cranky – breast
 Scared – breast
 Whatever ails you, give the breast!
 They could not fight against it
 They're nine and they still talk about it
 When I asked my daughter what she loved about it,
 she said it was the closeness, the warmth, the comfort
 We felt like we were one
 The three of us were one

I'm amazed that God gave us as women everything we need to keep these babies alive
 God gave our bodies everything a baby needs to survive in the womb and outside the
 womb
 We could be in some remote part of the world and a baby will survive because all it
 needs is his mother's milk
 I was just in awe how God created our bodies to be sustaining
 Basically, God gave us everything we need to mother babies
 It's amazing

Women: The Inferior Sex?

I've thought a lot about this in the last ten years
 Especially since having girls because I need to be able to show them how important they
 are to God
 I think I always felt like the inferior sex
 Until I became a mother
 Then I was like – pffffttttt!
 I'll never think again!

I think God would say that the most important job on the planet is to be fruitful and
 multiply

And God gave the most important job to women!
 Without women, we don't procreate and we are a dead species
 He gave the very most important job on earth to women

Isn't that poignant?
 This is my realization over the past 10 years
 Now I'm like – we are not the inferior sex
 If anything, we're the superior sex!
 It's really profound

The Christmas Story: The Vulnerability of Jesus and Mother Mary

Since becoming a mother, the Christmas story completely revolves around Jesus as a baby

My own babies were born on November 22 so they were just a few weeks old at Christmas

I remember Christmas Eve and holding these naked little babies and imagining Mary holding Jesus

Knowing that He was very special

Then the weeks and months of caring for Jesus as an infant

She would have breast fed him

Taken care of him and mothered him

Imagine that experience

I think about how vulnerable Jesus was

How vulnerable that God made Himself to come as a baby with no control over things

Without God coming as a vulnerable baby, we don't have salvation

Hmmmm!

That's full stop!

Without God coming as a baby, we don't have salvation

We don't have access to God in the way we know it

I'm surprised every year that God decided to come as a baby

Every year

Like – why?

Maybe because it's so identifiable – we were all babies at one point and all have mothers

No wonder the Catholics esteem Mary so much

The Holy Mother Mary really resonates with me

I don't think it's right to worship Mary or to pray to her but I don't see anything wrong with esteeming her

She was – goodness! – she was the mother to Jesus!

She was the human who had the most intimate relationship to Jesus

She must have had peace to know that Jesus had a purpose to fulfill

But man, it must have been painful

The Steadiness of Mothers and God:

This weekend my twins had Covid and all they did was cry

They cried from Friday night to Tuesday morning

And this was me all weekend – smiling amidst the chaos!
 Even though my girls are nine, I still gather them onto my lap and let them cry and bawl
 And I can sit there with a smile on my face

Mothers set the tone for the mood in the home
 If my husband is cranky – my children come to me for comfort
 If I'm cranky – my children come to me for comfort
 My children rely heavily on me to feel safe and secure

A mother doesn't have the luxury of throwing her own tantrums and losing her temper
 Children rely on the stability too much
 It doesn't feel like a heavy responsibility though
 It's actually helpful to have that awareness
 I know if I lose my cool, we're all going to be off-kilter for the whole night
 Last night, I was very close to losing my cool
 I just said to the girls – *I need 5 min in my room*
I'm going to have a laydown and you can play and we'll reset in a few minutes

You know, it really is a picture of God
 Because even though these kids are crying and complaining, carrying on and creating a fuss
 God is just like this mother
 God still loves us and we still bring Him joy
 He's probably smiling even in the face of our own temper tantrums

God is so steady
 Hmmm, look
 He's unchangeable, unflappable, steady, doesn't change
 Dependable, reliable
 All those things
 Always full of love and grace
 He can handle anything we're going through

This is a picture of God
 It doesn't matter how much chaos my life is in
 Or even what kind of chaos the world is in
 God's got it
 He can still have a smile on his face

The Sacrifice and Joy of Motherhood:

There were times when I've felt like – why did we do this to ourselves?
 There are moments when I'm feeling like a failure as a mother and I'm desperate for
 some peace and space in my brain
 Without children we would have more money, more time, more energy
 It would be a very different life

But those feelings are very fleeting

The joy far overshadows the difficulty
The joy far outweighs the challenges

I think the joy comes from the love
There's so much love!
We're such a tight little unit
We are just so darn happy
We really are – it's almost sickening
But the joy comes from the love

I was surprised how much I loved mothering
I didn't think I had the mother gene
I never wanted children
I also didn't meet my husband til I was 31 and then had infertility
So I didn't think I would even have a baby
I remember being pregnant – thinking, I hope I like this baby

I am shocked at how much I love mothering
I'm quite shocked at what a good mother I am
I know I'm a great mother
It's by far my best accomplishment in life
And I never thought I would even like it

Participant #7 – P7

The Inadequacy and Weight of Responsibility:

I never felt like parenting came naturally to me
 I felt inadequate compared to everybody else
 I hadn't been around babies
 So it was new
 I didn't feel like I was a natural mother

I remember trying to get my daughter to sleep
 Just feeling trapped
 She was colicky and fussy

I got better at with the second two kids
 Being able to look at them and see the ten fingers and the ten toes
 The awesomeness of creation and the perfection of new life

And I thought – *this is a lifetime responsibility!*
 It felt so heavy
 I knew it wouldn't end
 And it hasn't
 There's a weight of responsibility that comes with mothering

Pregnancy: The Shame and the Pride

Pregnancy didn't feel like a sacred experience
 It felt almost like a shame
 It makes me sad now when I think about it
 It's interesting when I think about the culture of abortion
 All I wore were those tent dresses
 To cover it up and make sure I didn't look pregnant

Yet – I remember feeling proud when I wore a maternity top I had made
 I was proud to wear it

I'm so glad nowadays that women are free to wear tight shirts
 And show off their bellies
 To be that bold and show up being pregnant
 I see a freedom with the younger women
 Maybe they enjoy their pregnancies better than I did
 There's more openness and excitement
 More talk about babies and being pregnant
 It's a good thing
 A positive thing

Mothering and Mary:

I remember sitting and rocking my baby at Christmas time
 Thinking how I relate to Mary

Thinking about all these things
 Pondering them in her heart
 I don't remember what I pondered
 Except I wonder
 If I was trying to imagine what his life would be

I just felt a different feeling about the Christmas story and Mary

The Vulnerability of Motherhood:

I felt I had to try and keep it together
 I didn't always feel free to be honest about my struggles
 Truthfully
 I had one friend who understood
 I was open with her
 I know I wasn't as honest with people as I am now
 Now I don't care what people think
 But at that the time, I was so worried about what other people thought

It wasn't until the kids were older that I got medication for depression
 I think all those years I struggled with depression and had no idea

We all need somebody older
 Someone with those kind of compassionate eyes
 Who is non-judgemental
 Who loves and accepts us without saying – *but you need to, whatever ...*
 Mothering can be a lonely experience

I hope I've been that sort of older person for my adult kids
 I want to assure them that I don't have it all together or have all the answers
 But I want them to share what they need to
 And know that I'm not going to judge them
 I might inside, once in a while, think – *well, why are you doing that?*

But overall, I want them to know it's safe to talk to me
 So it isn't such a lonely place for them
 I've learned that sort of compassion and safety over the years

Increased Trust: Let God Be God

I remember saying to God one day
Why did you make me a mother?

This is one time I felt like God spoke to me:
That's the only way you would learn to trust me

And it's been ongoing
 Just because my kids are in their 40's doesn't mean I don't need to trust
 It's an ongoing learning – to trust God for them

I remember at the end of June one summer
 I was desperate
 What am I going to do with these kids all summer?
 Then September came and I didn't want them out of my sight
 I remember very clearly God saying to me in my head –
The same Holy Spirit that is in you
Is in them

One of our friends was told by his mother that he should be in the ministry
 Not a farmer
 He said – *Mom, you're not my Holy Spirit*

It's hard to trust our children to God
 I want to be in control
 Because I think I know best

It's gotten easier over the years although I still think about it
 I guess I'm learning to just let God be God
 I'm realizing how small my picture of God has been and is
 I see God in the lives of my adult kids and their families in ways I never would have
 expected

A few years ago, I was praying something for one of our kids
 What I heard in my heart was – *Trust me*
 I argued with God, saying – *Well, I do trust You!*
 What I heard was – *No, you don't*
 I had to mull that over
 I thought – no, if I'm fretting so much about the situation, I'm obviously not trusting
 God to take care of it
 So trusting God has allowed me to enjoy my kids more

The whole thing of letting God be God
 That's been another whole thing
 It probably sums up my parenting

God's Unconditional Love: Being Able to Look at God

My father wasn't unkind
 But he wasn't emotional
 He was quite legalistic
 I was afraid of him

I think I saw God that way too
 In the early years of mothering, I was very afraid of God
 I thought I had to perform to please God
 In the last 20, 23 years, it has been life altering to learn
 To believe

That God loves me
 God loves me the way I am
 It's an unconditional love

I visited my daughter and son-in-law when their daughter was born
 I remember my son-in-law holding their new girl in his hands like this
 And her looking at him in the eye
 They were gazing into each other's eyes
 And I thought – *that's how I want to be able to look at God*
Like a child
 He was just so proud and loving her like that

I know I've avoided eye contact with people over the years
 I don't know why
 Was I afraid of them?
 What would they see in my eyes?
 (It didn't help that years ago I read you really shouldn't look into a man's eyes who isn't
 your husband because you might give them the wrong idea!)

This is what we pray for most for our kids
 That they would know that God loves them
 Bottom line
 That they would know and experience God's love
 I didn't know it or learn it and I didn't have that freedom
 Of knowing God's love
 But that has set me free
 I'm still learning what that means
 And how to live

Bigger Picture of What Following God Looks Like:

There's a big fear
 What if they don't follow God?
 The community we lived in was pretty judgemental
 (or maybe I was judgemental as to what it should look like!)

But I felt a lot of judgement
 So I was afraid what other people thought
 What if my kids make choices that take them away from God?
 From what I think following God looks like?

But then – what following God looks like has changed so much for me!
 Obviously it will change for them too

I remember for one of the high school graduations
 Our daughter had gone to the church party
 And we took the boys to the dance
 I was terrified that we had done wrong – what we were doing?

What we were we exposing our kids to?
I mulled that over for days

I can take you to the spot on the road
A few days later
When it became clear to me:
Jesus went to where the people were

Oh! Thank you, God!

Expanded View of God:

I used to think that unless people prayed a specific prayer and covered the bases
They probably weren't on their way to heaven

Now I look at people differently!
Who God accepts has changed over the years
If you could hear one of our very best friends talk
You would think – *oh my!*
At one stage I would have thought – *well, you're not walking with God*
But this man is a godly, godly man

I haven't said this to anyone
But my whole concept of heaven and hell are in the process of being changed
So the people I didn't think God would allow into heaven –
Ahhh!
Who am I to judge?

There's delight in my expanded view of God
And more freedom
Even freedom to doubt
It took me a long time to allow myself to doubt and to question
There's some very basics about Jesus being the Son of God and my Savior that I don't
doubt
I'm ok with that
I feel ok with questioning God though
And not expecting him to necessarily even answer
Just questioning and thinking things through and saying – *ok, I don't know*
But you're God
I'll have to let you decide that one

I've realized how small a view of God I've had
I remember a simple question one of the kids asked me one day
In frustration – they asked
Why can't we just be more like Jesus?
That has really stayed with me
That's what it boils down to

Rather than just proclaiming what we believe and that what we say is right
 But that we let Jesus live in us and through us
 That we be his hands and feet
 Does that make any sense?

Joys of Mothering:

I enjoy my kids when they talk about their friendships
 Their relationships with their kids
 The books they're reading
 Sharing stories of things they're proud of
 I just listening to them
 But also the negative
 The other day I had a text from one of them bemoaning something negative in one of
 their kids
 And I appreciated that
 Instead of sending me into a turmoil like it has in the past
 I think it's ok
 There's nothing I can do about it
 But ask God to be God in their lives
 As they went through the steps of dealing with the situation
 I thought – oh! That's really good
 Fancy that – God answered their prayer
 God did give wisdom
 I don't know if they saw it that way
 But that's how I saw it

Letting Go:

The whole process of letting go I found really hard
 I remember I had been away and came home
 My husband had let our daughter go to a party
 I was so ticked at him
 So mad
 And he said – *in a couple of months she's going to be on her own*
We've got to start letting her make her own choices

It's hard
 It's hard to let go
 I'm just thankful that I have a husband who is wise

Knowing God: A Meandering Path

Devotions have always been a struggle for me
 Very legalistically I have made myself read the Bible every day
 And have felt very guilty if I didn't
 I'm not sure if I got anything out of it alot of the time
 Maybe the legalism was good for me just to keep reading
 And it's not that I don't value it
 The older I get, I enjoy it more

And I know God feeds me through it
 But I'm not one of those people who just love reading the Bible

It's also been freeing for me to know that in the New Testament when it talks about the Word
 It's not really the Bible they're talking about
 It's the Word made flesh
 And He lives in me

So that's been so freeing
 Lots of time the Spirit brings Scripture to mind and I'm thankful for that
 Or takes a verse that I'm reading and makes it real
 But the Word lives in me
 That's been freeing

One time my son said to us that most of us take a meandering path to God
 That's how my parenting has been – a very meandering path
 I would get on a kick this way and I would follow this book
 Then I'd get on another one
 Then I quit reading books all together on parenting

So it's been a meandering path
 I don't feel like there's been a straight line in there at all
 It's been random and haphazard and just a big mess
 But when I say a big mess – I don't mean that it's been bad
 Maybe it's like a stew
 There's good things
 There's so much good in a good stew but it's all mixed together
 How do you separate it and take it apart?
 It feels like a big conglomeration of learning and trying and failing
 All the ups and downs and lows

But I wouldn't trade it for anything
 What I have learned from mothering has been so good
 This has been a good exercise to make me realize that I have learned something
 The reward is having these adults and kids as my friends
 We don't have the same close contact with grandchildren that others have
 But we know that they love us and we love them
 It's just a real gift

Participant #8 – P8**Ordinary & Supernatural, A Burden & a Blessing: The Paradoxes of Pregnancy**

I couldn't afford a fancy photographer
 You know, the ones with the pregnant woman floating in the clouds or whatever
 So I just took photos of myself at home

They are beautiful
 I'm so glad I took them
 Pregnancy is just so beautiful
 It seems miraculous
 Like, it's ordinary and happens every day
 It's just biological
 But it's also supernatural
 Out of this world

I was pretty cute when I was pregnant
 But pregnancy was also uncomfortable and painful
 It's both
 A burden
 And a blessing

Mary: Resonance & Sacrifice

My first Christmas with our daughter
 I felt very connected to Mary
 God really spoke to me
 God made His Word come alive
 In a way I couldn't have known
 Without a little baby in my arms
 It felt so sacred
 There are different characters in the Bible that I am drawn to
 But that first Christmas with our baby daughter –
 It was Mary

Nothing involves sacrifice
 I think of Mary and her sacrifice and suffering
 Our children are our everything
 But then they eventually grow away from us in a way
 We have to give them up
 I guess God did that with His Son
 Jesus did that with His life
 Mary did that with her son

I also sacrifice
 I sacrificed my career of teaching
 I don't regret it
 Because I consider my mothering

A ministry
A sacred work
Eternal work

Delight & Communion with God: The Day I Found Out I Was Pregnant

I think God delights in me, no matter what
I think God is delighted
As I shepherd my children
And am spiritually present for them
I think God delights in my faithfulness
To Him and to my children
In everyday little ways

I remember the day I found out I was pregnant with our daughter
I was sitting in my living room in our little condo
I was so full of joy
I remember looking out the window
And the trees were in full praise to God
It was a windy day
And nature was expressing what I was feeling
Just like that verse in the Bible about creation worshipping and praising God
That is a beautiful memory for me
That moment of being in God's presence
Feeling part of His plan and His will
Somehow joined
Through spirit and body and creation
God's overwhelming presence through it all was connecting the pieces in a new way

Still Smiling: The Paradox of Strength and Sorrow

The picture of the mom with the melting down toddlers
Reminds me of all the photos where I am smiling and looking pretty ok
But inside
I am right there with my kids
In meltdown mode

But – as moms – we smile
I don't know if that's good or bad

When I look back at the photos taken while I was in cancer treatment
I could smile through it all when the kids were around
I struggled with that though –
I prayed for wisdom to know how to be authentic

I had this big birthday party when I was in chemo
I was wearing a wig (which I hated)
I was smiling and doing my best for everyone around me
I think that's ok

Sometimes we have to do our best and be stable in situations
 But it's difficult to make it seem like we're ok
 When we're really struggling or suffering
 Another one of those paradoxes

Distance and Closeness : The Paradox of Prayer

My prayer was pretty basic
Help me, Jesus
 It's still that
Help me make it through the day
 It is just very painful - emotionally, physically, relationally, mentally
 And it continues to be so
Just help me be present and yet still have boundaries
Help me make it through the day
And love You
And love those around me
 Back to the basics

Sometimes I can't be physically present with my kids because of my health
 I have to step away and take care
 If my kids and husband are doing a sporting activity or an event
 And I know I can't keep up
 I struggle with that
 I grieve that I can't be physically present

But I have this idea:
 That if I can't be physically present, I can pray
 God has definitely laid it on my heart that I can be present through prayer
 I bring my grief to Him in those moments
 I let Him turn that into prayer
 For me and those I would like to be with

Expanded Mother Heart:

I pray a lot for my neighbourhood
 I don't play soccer and run like I used to
 Because all I can do is walk these days
 But I feel this sense of mothering
 For those in my community
 At the local school
 I love that
 There's space for my mother heart there

Shepherded by Jesus: The Tenderness & the Suffering

I have a sense of peace about my cancer
 God allowed this happen to me
 I trust His sovereignty
 But it has made me lean into Jesus more

I know God the Father, Son, Holy Spirit—they're all God (this is mind-boggling stuff)
But for whatever reason, I find God the Father to be more overwhelming (which He is!)

So I have felt cared for by Jesus as a shepherd, like Psalm 23
I use that Psalm daily
It's become a part of who I am
I feel mothered or shepherded by Jesus
Jesus is so powerful
Yet so tender

And Jesus suffered
Going through treatment, I felt such closeness to Jesus
Because Jesus has been there
These seem like Sunday School answers
But those things have really been driven home through suffering

I really connect with Jesus as One who suffered
Who knows despair
It's hard doing cancer at my age
Because I want to be a great mom
I don't want to lose my job as a mom prematurely
That's a reality that I have felt closely and heavily

It has driven me to be intentional
To rely on God's strength to be the right mother
Because most days I can't on my own

Postpartum Anxiety: The Paradox of My Weakness and God's Strength

In the year following my kids' birth
I had a lot of postpartum anxiety
A lot of time I felt trapped in a dark room
Trying to settle a baby
Holding my baby and thinking –
I can't do this

The weight of taking care of them was heavy
It was definitely a hormone driven imbalance
Combined with lack of sleep
That turned to obsessive anxiety
It made it difficult to function
It was consecutively stronger with each child
I remember really mentally struggling in that dark place

God brought to mind in a very powerful way this idea
This verse – of His power being made perfect in my weakness
So I wrote that verse on a little card and put it next to the rocking chair
That was my go-to

Just calling out to God
 Knowing that I am weak
 But that His power works through that

As a mom, I often feel weak and inadequate
 But instead of despairing about that
 I bring it to God and trust that His power is working through my weakness
 Another paradox

Spirituality of Mothering:

As I was growing up, I could work hard and achieve what I wanted to
 I could do well at things
 I felt like God wanted that from me
 It was more works oriented

Being a mother has very much shifted me to a healthier balance
 Of grace and works
 God's grace has become so apparent to me
 Through struggles and weaknesses as a mother
 It was either -

Be really hard on myself and destroy myself

Or

Lean into God and experience His grace
His understanding, love, forgiveness, patience
 It's like I was being harder on myself than God was
 Now He's helping me be gentler with myself
 And gentler with those around me
 It's so much more gracious

My art is definitely very spiritual to me
 Often it's coming from a pretty emotional raw place
 It's a way to express intense paradoxes that are otherwise difficult to express
 My Christmas piece was so dark
 But I was feeling pretty dark through that season
 Having a way to express that helped me
 It was probably what others were also feeling
 God placed it on my heart and helped me make that painting
 I just put it out there and trust that He uses my art in some way
 It makes me joyful, even though it's challenging and tiring
 But God works through my creative efforts

Being sick has given me a lot more eternal perspective
 That's a huge gift from God
 It's been hard earned
 But I see things differently
 Being their mother and center and source of love
 Is all very worth it

Mothering is a priority and vocation
 It's God's work in my heart and mind
 I get pushback for that – from culture and even doubts from myself
 But mothering is just so spiritual in nature
 It's a little bit inherent
 And as I've grown spiritually
 That has just confirmed it

Loved by God through My Child:

I remember tucking my son (age 5) into bed one night
 He taught himself to read at the age of four so he was an amazing little reader
 We laid on his bed
 I was reading a chapter from the *Storybook Bible* (by Sally Lloyd Jones)
 And I just stopped
 I could not read
 Could not speak
 I was so overwhelmed and sad with my cancer diagnosis

Without a word, he took the Bible
 Just picked up where I had left off
 He read to me

That memory, that story is so precious
 At such a difficult time
 God encouraged me
 God loved me
 Through my child
 It was a beautiful mothering moment

Time with God:

I find that I have to fight the desire to withdraw from people
 Even my own family
 I don't say this in a pious way – but I much prefer God's presence
 That's where I heal every single day
 It is absolutely essential
 It's not – maybe I'll spend time with God today
 It's – I must
 It is the only way forward
 I need it
 It's my sweetest time

We have a teenager
 An increasingly independent human being
 Who wants to make their own choices
 So I pray for wisdom
 To know how to guide and give direction

Inviting God into my everyday interactions and choices I make
Setting an example for them
Inviting them to seek God's wisdom
That shifts responsibility away from us to them
I don't always know if it's going well
But I pray for wisdom

I appreciate that the kids see me have my devotional time
I sit on the couch and read a passage and they don't disturb me
They know, they understand that that's special to me
And that I love that time
They're getting something there

Sometimes I feel a little strange about not wanting to be with others and just alone with
God
Part of that is trauma
It's overwhelming being with people sometimes
But it's so easy to be with God
I know that I'm with God always
But my contemplative time with Him and my time in His Word
It's like a healing balm
This is when I'm most peaceful
I don't feel the pain
Somehow God had just made it that way
So I keep coming back
It's one of the things I'm really grateful for

Participant #9 – P9

From Fear to Partnering with God:

When our daughter was 3 months old, I choose the word *unafraid* for the new year
Postpartum blues combined with being worried and afraid about everything

Is she breathing properly?

Is she getting enough to eat?

Should I introduce a soother?

I spent a lot of time rocking my daughter to sleep

Sometimes she slept on me and that was really really hard

I found it so exhausting and difficult

My prayers were like

Please, God, please, please, please let her go in her bed

Over and over again

When she didn't go into her bed after that prayer, I was angry and frustrated

God helped me change that prayer to

I want to do whatever it is that she needs me to do

God, give me everything she needs me to be for her

When I started praying that way, everything changed

I felt like God showed me how I could sleep with her on me

I began to look forward to her nap time

I prepared for nap time – my water, a book on the kindle, my phone, all the things

We were so cozy and she was so happy

I was so relaxed and I felt the change in me

I believe God gave me that prayer and said

Work through this with me

It will be better than me answering the please, please, please prayer

In response to my word *unafraid*

God gave me a word back – *with*

I really felt and understood that – *do not be afraid for I am with you*

You are not in this little room by yourself

Here – I am with you

It felt like a partnership with God

It didn't feel like – *Ok, God, You're not answering my prayer so I have to change*

It felt like God was saying – *I'm with you – and I want to give you everything you need*

Ask me, ask me this way

It's going to be different in your heart if you ask me this way

Because I hear

Then it was like – *oh! We're in this together*

I'm actually not alone

I have felt the presence of God very strongly in other ways before but

Maybe this sounds so weird – but I felt like God was partnering with me in the nap

That it was like – *ok, God, it's nap time! Let's do this!*

Pregnancy: Worry and Fear

I have rheumatoid arthritis so have taken medication since I was 20
 A close friend of mine had a still birth at 37 weeks
 And here I was having a baby in my late 30's
 I worried all the time
 I was also so so thrilled to be pregnant
 We called the baby Sprout and I spent a lot of time praying for Sprout
 I was just so excited
 Honestly, I couldn't believe it was happening

But I did not know how I was going to do it
 I'm a teacher and had taught for 15 years up to that point
 It was going to be my first September not going back to school
 I couldn't picture that and it worried me
 I know how to do school
 But I did not know how to do this
 It felt like everyone had done this before
 People said – *oh, you've been around your friends' kids*
You have nephews
You've got this!

But I was like – *I never keep the children!*
I actually don't know how to do this
And what if I fail?
 I was good at being a teacher
 What if I'm not good at being a mom

There was a lot of time in prayer with God about all those things

God's Grace in Getting Pregnant:

I just assumed I probably wouldn't have children
 I didn't even know if I would get married
 And if I did (because of how old I am) I assumed that person might already have children
 I was ok with all that

Until I met my husband

I knew what an awesome dad he would be
 I worried I couldn't give him this
 What if this wasn't in the cards?
 We talked about it when we were dating and just left it at the feet of the Lord
 Saying – *if You think we'll be good parents*
Then we'd love to get pregnant
If there's a child who needs a home

We're open to adoption or possibly fostering

Then we got pregnant quite quickly!

Maybe God did that because I was getting older

Maybe God knew I was such a worrier

Maybe God just didn't want me to wait

Called to be a Mother?:

Maybe I did feel there was something wrong with my relationship with God

That this desire of my heart was not being fulfilled

I saw this happening for everyone else but not for me

I remember praying - *what is wrong with me?*

God, am I not listening to You enough?

Am I not doing enough?

Am I missing something that is right in front of me?

I chose the word *awake* one year because I wondered if my eyes were not open to things and people that God had put in my life

I thought I was letting my mom down

I eventually said that to her

That was a healing and restorative conversation for me

I always knew I was going to be a teacher

In my second year of university, I had a sit-up-in-the-middle-of-the-night moment

Oh my goodness!

God gave me a little nudge – *you're going to be a teacher!*

I always felt like it was very much a gift from the Lord

I don't know if I ever felt called to be a mother

If that makes sense

Not that I didn't have the desire

I just assumed it wasn't going to happen for me

I had done the work with God to be okay with that so I was good

But then I got the most wonderful, amazing surprise!

Knowing God while Mothering:

I've gotten to know God in a new way since becoming a mother

There's a trusting God with this tiny little person

I've never had to rely on God so much before

Taking care of a tiny human was brand new

It felt weighty

What if I can't do it?

What if I'm not good enough?

What if I fail?

We didn't have the best breastfeeding relationship
 After 5 days, the public health nurse came for a regular checkup
 I just said – *I don't think this is going well and we're topping up with formula*
Nothing is going well
 She was amazing!
 She said – *do you want to keep doing this?*
 I said *no*
 She was like – *ok, it's a new day*
 We switched to formula
 It was very clear that this was best for both of us
 It was wonderful for my husband to bond with her and we took turns in the night
 It was all so good for us

At the same time, I felt like I already failed
 That I was too old to do all the things I was supposed to do

Knowing how much I love our little girl has given me insight into how much God loves me
 For sure
 I just get that in a different way now

Understanding how exponential that love that God must have for me
 And how much He just longs to do things with me
 How He just wants so much not to be the unseen silent partner in my life
 He wants to be active
 How much better and wonderful and richer it is when I let God do that

Since becoming a mom
 I've understood a depth of love that I did not know
 It helps me understand how much God loves me
 And desperately wanting that closeness with Him
 As I experience with my own child

God as Mother: Protector & Comforter

I'm most drawn to God as a mother in terms of protection and comfort
 I have this image that He is right beside me
 That I can tackle whatever is going to come my way
 Because God is going to give me what I need

As a mom, it feels like a huge weight is gone
 A huge release
 Like a physical tightness in my chest is gone

If I hear her cry in the night, myself of old would be like –
Oh no! I'm so tired, please God

Now I'm like – *I don't know what she needs*

I just need You, God, to give me what I need so I can give her what she needs

I want her to feel so safe and loved and secure

To know that I am going to come

I'm so much more at peace

Since lots of my friends' children are much older

Or my friends are ten years younger than me

I find it hard to find someone with a pretty similar shared experience

So knowing that God is with me

That I am not alone

Has been all the more powerful

I feel like God has been with me the way you would ask your mom to come and be with you

You know how you want your mom when you're sick

You want your mom when you're tired

I need God when I'm exhausted and tired or sick

At the end of my rope

Asking God for help feels like a call-your-mom kind of request

Enlarged Heart:

I think I also understand my own mom more

I clashed a lot with my own mom and often felt that my opinion didn't matter

That I talked too much

Even felt unloved

It would break my own mom's heart for her to hear that

But I understand things differently now

I have a better understanding of my own mom loving me

What Do You Need From Me?

What do you need from me?

I learned that phrase in teaching years and years ago

It changed the way I taught

I ask it in my relationships now

What do you need from me?

If my daughter was able to tell me that she just couldn't sleep

Or was cranky and wanted to cry all day

I'm confident that my response would be the same

It's ok, honey

What do you need from me?

I did not put all that together!

But yes! Oh ha!

You're so good at this!

Oh God – that is not even what God seems to be saying

This is what's happening for sure

God is saying the same to me
What do you need from me?

Hmmm.
 Wow!
 That's cool

Mothering and Joy:

When I pick her up at daycare and her whole face is this massive smile
 She squeals, like *Mommy is here!*
 I love that
 I just can't stop watching her little head wiggle and bum wiggle as she walks
 She's so sweet

I love everything she's learning
 I love watching her with her dad
 I love seeing other people with her

She loves to sing
 I love singing with her and having her match my pitch back
 She's trying to do itsy-bitsy-spider
 She loves reading right now – bringing me her books and all the flaps and stuff
 She's trying to do so many things on her own
 She wants every kind of cup and water bottle at the same time

She is so full of joy
 She is so so wonderful
 Such a special gift

I think God might be proud of me
 I am trying really hard to be the best I can be for her
 I can't do it on my own
 I can't even do it with just my husband
 I chose the word *delight* this year
 I think about the pure joy my child brings me
 I can't even
 I've become that person who after I've spent the whole day with her and I've put her to bed and I'm tired
 I pull out my phone and look at pictures and videos of her
 Because I just can't get enough of her

I think about how much I delight in her
 I think God delights in that too
 That He's delighting in me
 The more I delight in her, I think God delights in me

An Answered Prayer: Safe, Secure, and Loved

Two or three times a day

I would pray

Lord, may she feel *safe, secure, and loved*

I didn't say those words to anyone except my husband

When she was trying out daycare for a few days, they were great

They told us – *don't change a thing at home*

Don't stop rocking her sleep – we'll rock her to sleep if that's what she needs

I said to them – *thank you! I'm so grateful for all you're doing for our girl*

Her teacher said – *we just want her to feel safe, secure, and loved*

I started to cry

You don't get much more of a direct answer to prayer than that, do you?

It's pretty amazing

To think that God hears every single thing we say

He's been with me the whole time and is still with me

He loves my little girl so much and knows how much we love her

God is going before us

Participant #10 – P10

Pregnancy:

I actually hated being pregnant
 It was awful and limiting
 But it is good training
 For you are no longer
 Your time
 Your body
 Is no longer yours
 The selflessness of motherhood starts right then
 Even on a small scale
 Like not eating non-pasteurized cheese

As soon as your belly grows though
 The anticipation and excitement grows
 And the nervousness – *do I know what I'm doing?*

It's also like – *I got this*
I'm fine
God will get me through

Especially with our 5th kid
 We rolled the dice and had the 5th
 She was just so hard
 It was two years of non-stop disaster
 She wasn't healthy and there were things wrong
 But now, she is an absolute joy in our lives
 We can't even fathom the gift that she is
 Oh my goodness! Can you imagine if we didn't have her?
 The 5th took a bit of prodding
 But they are all such gifts

Being Made Female and Breastfeeding: A Gift, Not a Curse

As a teenager, I wanted to be the best aunt ever but I wasn't going to be a mom
 Then I met my husband – and he wanted 12 kids
 As we fell in love, he literally changed my mind and God softened my heart

In fact, in high school I wanted to be a boy
 I dressed like a boy
 I hated that I had to have a period
 Despised having a female body
 Hated the girl drama and relationships
 I was envious of boys – that they could be carefree, have easy friendships, not be concerned what people thought of them, just play sports, and be fine
 If you looked at my prayer journals as a teenager, I probably asked God –
Why didn't you make me a boy?

Someone said to me –

Aren't you thankful you were born in the time when your parents didn't say – oh, ok!

Let's get you some hormones or you can have gender reversal surgery

Let's cut off your boobs

Instead, my mom said – *No. You are created in God's image and He wanted you to be a girl*

My parents never entertained ideas that I was made wrong

But I never embraced or enjoyed being a girl until ...

I held my babies in my arms and watched them nurse and grow from just my body

It was the most fascinating thing

This sounds weird but we would sit and just watch

There's a pride associated with breastfeeding

I loved nursing my babies and watch them get fatter and fatter

It was like – *I'm doing that! My body is doing that!*

We would sit and squeeze their legs and marvel over them

What a miracle breast milk is!

That was the first time I realized it's a privilege to be a girl

That it is an incredible gift

Now when my own girls complain about puberty

I say – *yes, but you get to have babies*

That feeling you get when you hold your newborn baby is over is unlike any other feeling

Your husband doesn't get that

I've even had dads say to me – *it's not fair*

Moms have this bond with newborns that we don't

Even to this day, the kids will be like – *Mom! Mom! Mom!*

My husband will say – *hey, I can answer that question! Dad is here*

They'll just look at him and be like – *no, I don't want you. I want mom*

He knows there's this privilege of being a mom and having this bond with your kids

Dads can have an amazing bond with their kids too - but it's not the same

God Knew:

Some of the journeys God takes us on are painful

Some are more character building

But they are joyful all the time

I was super super selfish

I think that's why our first child was an accident or a surprise

If God hadn't brought that baby into our lives, we probably would have just kept putting it off

Let's travel another year

Let's wait til we've paid off the mortgage

Let's wait til we've made more money

But I think God knew that I needed to be dependent on Him

That's what mothering does
 Makes me dependent on God
 It's a humbling thing
 I'm so self-sufficient, healthy and strong
 But I didn't feel healthy during pregnancy
 Although I loved the miracle of feeling the baby move and my husband loved watching
 the belly grow,
 I hated it
 I felt awful

Being a healthy person and having an amazing first-world life
 Until pregnancy I didn't have struggles
 There was nothing
 That created such dependence on God
 Like pregnancy

Delight and Awareness of God's Generosity:

Your love just multiplies
 With each kid, we realized how much more of a gift from God they were
 Our awareness of what a treasure they were grew
 We marvelled so much more
 At God's creation, at His perfection
 We savoured so much more
 Each moment, each stage
 That joy just grew and grew and grew

Even now, on our evening walks
 My husband and I will be like – *well, what about having another baby?*
 We're not going to
 But there is this awareness of what amazing creations they are
 Babies are miracles –
 That we create
 Or God creates and grows inside us
 It's mind-boggling
 The joys outweigh the struggles
 All those joys made pregnancy worth it in an instant

If I can watch my kids journey together in their relationships with God, that would be
 amazing
 My dream come true and my life goals accomplished
 If they marry a godly spouse who loves Jesus more than them and partners with them
 and raises kids to love God
 Then it's all worth it

Every time one of my children makes a profession of faith

Those are profound moments for my husband and I
 That's the biggest thing we want them to do
 We didn't have a child dedication for each one
 But in our hearts we give them back to God
 They are yours
 And we'll do our best while we have them here on earth

Each time on their birthday, I sit back and marvel that God has given them to me for another year
 Like, I don't deserve this
 So many moms don't get their kids past 9 or 10 or 18
 So it's like an undeserved grace
 I am so thankful for each of those years
 If you're not a mom, you don't experience that profound – oh wow!
 I just had another whole year with this kid
 (Is that your goal to make each mom cry?)

A Peek into God's Unconditional Love for Us

Babies can't do anything for me
 They can't sweep my kitchen floor
 They can't earn money to make our household run better
 They are 100% dependent on me
 They are 100% just taking
 Take, take, take

Yet I absolutely love them!
 I treasure my children so much
 Yet it is only a fraction of how much God loves me
 When I try to comprehend that, it just blows my mind
 The same way that my love for my newborn is not contingent on how much value they bring to the household or how much they sleep through the night
 I have no expectations or demands for them

To think that God looks at me the same way
 That God's love for me is not contingent on my performance
 I struggle to come back to that and not feel defeated
 Like, I haven't shared the gospel with enough people or I haven't served others this week
 I've only served my household or focused on myself or whatever
 We think in human-based performance all the time

Yet when I look at how much I love my children
 So fully and completely
 Without them being able to give anything back to me
 It is like God saying – *I still loved you, even when you were a baby Christian*
Even when you went through a stage of not producing fruit or whatever
My love for you didn't fade away

It didn't decrease

That whole concept is unbelievable
 It's hard to take in as truth
 It makes me feel guilty
 Because there is an overwhelming responsibility of that love
 It's like, if you love me that much and some days I barely give you the time of day
 How evil am I?
 Like there's no way He could love a filthy sinner like me

But when you see how much you love your newborn
 It's like God gives you a window into how much He loves you
 So how could I not want to serve Him?
 And give my life to Him?

Mary and Mothering:

Having a human grow inside me gave me
 So much more understanding of the Christmas story and Mary
 Being nervous
 Not knowing what's going on
 Yet, excited and anticipating this baby

I'm amazed at Mary's response in the story
 I would have wanted to ask more questions
 But she was so at peace with the fact that s
 She was housing the Savior
 She didn't try to keep it a secret
 She could have tried to downplay it
 Or been like – maybe I didn't see an angel
 Or maybe I was wrong or misinterpreted that
 But she seemed at peace
 She seemed to have this understanding of what she was doing

I wonder about her role as a mom
 How do you parent God?
 Did she marvel over Him getting fatter and fatter as she nursed Him?
 Was she in awe over what happened?

God as Father and Shepherd:

I don't think of God as a mother
The Shack depicted the Holy Spirit, God and Jesus
 One of them was female
 Maybe it was God
 I really struggled with that
 I think because I have a really good earthly father
 I don't have a problem when the Bible speaks of God as a father
 It's comforting and generates great images of God

For people who don't have a good earthly father,
 I know they struggle with that illustration
 I love God as a father, but I never see Him in a mother role

I like God as a shepherd
 As a mom, I have so many little ones
 Like my little flock
 A shepherd is to care for the sheep and keep them all safe and herded together
 So that stuff comes alive for me
 I want my whole flock healthy too
 So that image of God has come to life for me

Dependence on God: Argument with Teenager

I would have thought I had my life together before children
 I thought I was good at anything I put my mind to
 Now I am so much more aware of my dependence
 Having lots of kids makes me 100% dependent on God
 I know so much more so that I can't do anything in my own strength
 I know there are holes in our parenting
 When we've screwed up in our own sin or lack of wisdom
 But trusting that God will be the One to fill in the gap

I used to have this mindset that if I just did all the right steps and parent in a biblical manner
 That this kid would follow God
 Over the years, God has shown me that while I am responsible for parenting them
 I am not responsible for their salvation
 God is
 I'm operating out of the sin of pride if I think that I'm going to control them
 That's freeing

Other times, it feels like so much pressure to do it right
 Like, I can't do this, Lord - it's too big of a job
 I'm fighting a spiritual battle for them because Satan wants my kids
 In society today, we're taught that medicore motherhood is ok
 Almost like a badge of honour - like, *is it wine o'clock yet?*
 It's easy to get trapped in that mindset
 Yet, the responsibility is huge to stay connected to God on my own
 If I don't remain in the vine as a mother
 If I don't spend time with Him
 And get filled up enough to be able to give to my kids - then it's not self care

I do feel like a partnership with God
 Mostly a bad partnership though where it's I need His strength to get through this!

Last week, I got into an argument with my oldest boy
He was coming out of a lesson late and we were trying to get his sister somewhere at the same time
I was like – *you can't disrespect other people's time!*
I was so mad at him – *how dare he? how dare he?*
He was so stressed from the whole day and he lost it on me
I know better than to jump on the teenager roller coaster - but I did anyways
We got super upset at each other and nothing good came out of it
Later, I had to go to him and repent and ask for forgiveness
Also with God

Every day I want them to know I depend on God and need His forgiveness
If they just think I'm rolling through life
They won't see their need for a Savior and they won't see the gospel

APPENDIX H: POETIC RESPONSES

As the researcher, I created poetic responses of my own for each of the participants. This allowed me to confirm that they had been heard and to share some of my experiences.

1. Mothering: Knowing and Participating with God

Dear P1-

You speak of mothering as an Immanuel experience – of being with God
That resonates with me
Pregnancy and birth - what strange and magical experiences
Even though I experienced it five times, it never got old
My appreciation for the experience only grew
I remember scooping Simon out of the water and holding him close
While Paul held me close
And crying tears of holy amazement – how was this even possible?

Like you said, God could have chosen other ways to populate the earth
But God invites women to work with God
Indeed, what a kindness, what an honour
I can't help but raise my eyebrows when I hear the term "the weaker sex"
As a man from church said to me – "I don't know where they get that from"

Because God invites us to co-create and co-labour with God
It seems that deep and intimate connection with God is almost inescapable
You articulate this shift from naïve faith to mature trust
Increased confidence in God
Prayers marked with expectation and persistence
And less fear and worry
After all, this is God we are working with

I love how your picture of God has grown through the years
Mothering has given you so many opportunities to be with God and work with God
You know God more and more in God's fullness and beauty
Mothering has given you heartsight
(That's Lillias Trotter's term for seeing things as they truly are, as God sees things)
Despite your uncertain or impatient times of mothering
It is God's kind invitation for divine participation that sings above all the other notes

It's what makes you a beautiful mother
Your deep confidence in a kind God
Your faith-full, fear-free prayers
And your steady gaze of love
All shall be well.

Elizabeth

2. The Vulnerability of Infant Jesus

Dear P2 –

I think you're right - we can read books and listen to podcasts
 But there's nothing like mothering as an opportunity to know God
 The outrageous love we have for these tiny humans
 The inevitable suffering involved as we realize their independence and free will
 That we are in over our heads
 As Simon Peter says – to whom shall we go?

Mothering makes us so vulnerable
 I remember when I realized that I was forever ruined by these five babies I loved so
 dearly
 My heart would be forever entwined with theirs
 And although there would be plenty of love and joy, I would be hurt

You talk about the infant Jesus
 So helpless and vulnerable
 What a mystery and miracle

Jesus could have come walking down the streets of Jerusalem as a teenager
 Or sailing in on a boat from the Mediterranean Sea as an adult
 But instead, Almighty God arrived as an embryo planted in Mary's belly
 What a high-risk, high-reward divine adventure

I wonder if God wept tears like blood just before the Incarnation
 God must have known the suffering and vulnerability that this would involve
 And yet Jesus came
 Born of a woman and tended by a woman in his most fragile years

As a mother of six, you know what that helplessness looks like
 How much care a newborn needs from his mother
 To think that Jesus wanted that sort of connection with humanity
 With a woman named Mary

A newborn baby is always present
 Either close by or wrapped onto our body or tied onto our back
 As mothers, we know his dietary intake and daily bowel habit
 And if we do forget for a moment, the fullness of our milk-laden breasts remind us

It might have made more sense for Jesus to come as a mother
 But no

Elizabeth

3. A God Who is Present and Suffers

Dear P3

To be a mother is to suffer
 Mothering opens up all these new possibilities of fear and pain
 I guess that's what love does
 Even though there is great joy involved
 The exposure, the vulnerability cannot be dismissed
 There is a sort of desperation that comes along with mothering
 I, too, cling to the hope that there is a Mother God out there, right here

I love the paradigm shift that you have worked through
 From God as wizard
 To God who is present and suffers with us
 As tempting as it is to desire and believe in God as wizard
 (Oh, think of all the wishes we'd make!
 Including the final wish to have more wishes!)
 But I agree—it's a disturbing notion

Instead we have a God who is present with us
 I think back to the creation story and here is a God who bends down
 Kneels down in the dirt
 Then we are formed by God's own hands
 and brought to life with God's own breath
 Declared very good
 Maybe introducing your children to Creator God first is a great idea
 We have a God who is tenderly present
 ...especially in our suffering
 After all, our God is familiar with suffering
 Think of the vulnerability that comes along with all of God's children
 (After our interview, I searched etsy for Black Madonna icons!)

Along with you, I want to applaud that our female bodies are good and beautiful
 Pregnancy is a giant invitation into the joy of being human, being made woman
 All of it – even, especially maybe, the messy bits
 Speak of the glorious experience of mothering
 As you say, God gets it
 All of it
 God is not anti-human or anti-woman
 Instead, God is glorified through our maternal bodies

After all, God chose to enter the world through a woman's body

Elizabeth

4. The Christmas Story: How Infant Jesus Introduces a Bigger Picture of God

Dear P4

I loved your reflections on John 1:14 and the Incarnation
 I too have wondered with perplexion—why did God come as a baby?
 It seems so risky
 As mothers, we know how helpless and dependent little babies are
 How vulnerable they are
 Maybe even more so in ancient times
 God could have come a different way
 Yet – here we have God entering our world through a woman’s body as an infant
 Just like you and me
 Seems a bit scandalous

Your paradigm shift during pregnancy
 From a stoic, distant God to a present, fully human Jesus is significant
 We have a God who comes close
 Who isn’t afraid of our emotions
 Or put off by our personalities, as you say
 We hear the self-critical voices that speak so loudly and show up often and unexpectedly
 But these voices do not speak truth
 Instead we have a God who generously loves and affirm the human experience
 Oh, what good news this is

Like you said, our God is not stingy
 Carefully doling out grace and goodness
 Mindful not to spill or waste
 Instead, it is grace upon grace
 Like the parable of the sower says, God is like the care-free gardener
 Tossing truth and goodness and beauty all around
 God is not worried
 There is always enough

This bigger picture of God is exciting
 It makes me expectant and curious
 Also a little fearful—am I going down the wrong road? Is this ok?
 Even though we crave it, sometimes mystery is scary
 Sometimes the little boxes are much more comfortable than these wide open spaces
 And yet – our God is ineffable
 Of course, God is too much for us

I love hearing you say that mothering is a place to discover the bigness of God
 Especially since mothering is often within four small walls

Elizabeth

5. Presence of God

Dear P5.

It seems as though mothering has confirmed for you the presence of God

Sometimes in dramatic moments
Like praying for your motorbike-riding son
Knowing regardless of what happened
God was with you

Or those middle-of-the-night prayers when God wakes you up
There's a sense that you are not alone
That God is with you
Releasing you from worry
Giving you conviction about mothering decisions
Loving you as you love your children

Mostly though
It's the everyday
I loved your line about mothering and living and gliding along in the love of God
What a great stream to be floating in
Denise Levertov has a poem about staying afloat
How we can splash about trying to keep our heads above water
Working ever so hard ...
But how we slowly start to sink
Instead she suggests floating on our backs
In the ocean of God's grace
That's how we stay afloat
Trusting, maybe even resting (!)
Living like God is sustaining and upholding us

I think you're right
When God is at the center of everything
Of who we are and what we do and how we live
It is a gentle and joy-filled experience
Living in the presence of God

Simone Weil defines prayer as attention
Turning our heads (and hearts) towards God
Not with muscular effort
But more the kind of loving effort by which a fiancée accepts her lover
I want to learn more about loving God like that

Elizabeth

6. A Bigger Picture of God

Dear P6.

I loved our conversation
 I can't but help laugh that you thought you would never be married with children and
 then God gave you twins!
 God must have been smiling when all that happened

I also wonder if God drew a long breath and said something like-
Hey, we've got some work to do
For too long you have thought this is all about you being good and doing the right
things
Let's change that

So in God's generous grace, God blessed you with two baby girls
 Despite the fear, the anxiety, the lack of faith all through pregnancy
 Going against the church culture that you were raised in
 That declared God would bless you if you had enough faith
 God blessed you when you were full of fear ... not faith
 This is the upside-down kingdom of God!

And to see how that trust in God has spilled over to other areas of your life –
 The death of your dad, the pandemic, raising teenagers
 Faith, not fear, characterizes you now
 No more *please, please prayers*
 Instead – *I trust in You*

I'm so glad God gave you girls
 They get to be surrounded by affirmations of their female bodies
 Wouldn't it be a grace to watch them breastfeed their own babies one day?
 The kryptonite of the maternal body (That phrase has stuck for me!)
 With you as their mother, I doubt these girls will wonder how they measure up to the
 boys
 Or disregard their own humanity because it isn't male
 I'm guessing your girls will grow up with a holy respect and awe for women

To think that God gave the job of procreation to women
 That it was the woman at the well who became the first evangelist
 It was Mary Magdalene who first saw Jesus after the resurrection – the first eyewitness
 It was Phoebe who delivered (and most likely interpreted) what is often considered the
 most theologically-dense book of the Bible – Romans
 It was a woman who first tended to his newborn body
 And it was women who cared for his crucified body
 May your little women know they are in good company!

Elizabeth

7. Bigger Picture of God

Dear P7

I was cheering you on during our interview
 So grateful that mothering has given you a bigger picture of God
 I noticed this move from fear to faith and delight
 To being grounded in the unconditional love of God
 To knowing how much you are loved and treasured
 And to think that you are praying this same thing for your children and grandchildren
 They are blessed indeed

I loved your paradigm shift from God only in the Word to God as the Word
 God made flesh and God in us
 I believe this more and more
 That God is present and that God so loves this weary beautiful world

You spoke honestly and boldly
 Trusting that God is with you
 As you change your mind and adopt new ideas and ways of thinking
 About God and grace and salvation and heaven and hell and the Spirit
 This could easily be a journey of fear
 (And I'm guessing there might be moments of that!)
 But it sounds like a journey of freedom and a move into that spacious place of divine
 delight

Mothering reveals our most inner inadequacies, doesn't it?
 More than one night I've woken up at 2am
 Gripped with the realization that I have failed one of our children
 It's an awful feeling
 Then knowing that I can't fix things
 Oh, how I loved my false sense of control when they were younger!

But as you said, the same Spirit who is present in us is always present in our children
 That one thought keeps both of us going
 That God is present and active in their lives
 Breaking out of the boxes we make
 Expanding our vision

You are loving your children and those around you with the sort of compassion and
 generosity
 That God has loves you with
 You are that steady presence that God is for you

I think that's how it's all supposed to be work

Elizabeth

8. Divine Participation and Spiritual Creativity

Dear P8

Thank you for sharing your story
 I know cancer has complexified your mothering experience
 No wonder you resonate with Mary
 There's a woman who suffered
 She had much to ponder

I remember you saying how creation seemed to celebrate that positive pregnancy test
 with you
 A new sense of connection with God
 As you joined in and gave your little girl life
 Let it be as You have said!

When things were a bit chaotic with chemo
 And you smiled steadily through the suffering
 Maybe Mary did that too
 Not exactly knowing how things would go
 But hanging onto a promise
 Being a steady presence for Simon and Matthew and the other men

I love how you have let God turned your grief into prayer
 How God has given you spiritual creativity
 Guiding you into new ways of being present with your children
 Even when you're lying in bed and too sick to move
 How prayer makes presence possible for you

Though soccer and running are not possibilities right now
 God has enlarged your heart
 For the local school
 And your neighbourhood
 Walking and praying
 Your mother heart tending to those around you

And then how God has awakened your artistic self
 Beautiful abstract painting
 A quiet and usually solitary experience, bathed in prayer
 That suits your current realities
 Joyful work that God has placed in your heart
 To express intense paradoxes and journey through difficulties

I'm guessing Mary would have liked one of your paintings hanging on her wall

Elizabeth

9. From Fear to Divine Participation

Dear P9

Your story of learning how to nap with your baby girl
 Such a beautiful example of mothering as divine participation
 Those please, please prayers are from a place of desperation and fear
 Almost as if we forget that God is indeed with us
 I confess that I have prayed my share of please, please prayers over the years
 Wanting God to make a certain thing to happen
 And tragically, forfeiting an opportunity to participate with God

To think that the question God gave you
 Years before, as a teacher
 Was the question that you would ask in order to care for your little girl
 But really – this was the question that God was asking you
What do you need from me?

It is different in our heart when we pray that way, isn't it?
 Not only do we know in an experiential way that God is with us
 But we have the chance to cooperate with God
 We know it in our hearts, not just our heads

It makes me wonder how God might be asking that question to me
 Of course, I believe that God loves me and provides for me
 That God is interested in my life
 And yet – I should consider that question more often
 It relies on the supposition that God can provide and wants to provide
 That God wants to be part of our lives
 Or as you say – not just be the “unseen silent partner” in our lives
 That question reminds me that God doesn't always just expect me to pull up my socks
 and grind it out
 It's a kinder, more gracious picture of God than I sometimes imagine
 That God is more willing to help
 More interested
 It encourages more prayer conversation
 With the expectation that not only God hears, but that God wants to speak
 It means abiding with God, like a branch and a vine

Isn't mothering a gracious gift, a window into the richness of God's love for us?
 Based on our experience as mothers, we can better imagine God's love for us
 The delight
 The pride
 The desire to be close to us

Elizabeth

10. Unconditional Love of God

Dear P10

Even though as a teenager, you didn't want children
 Even though growing up, you wished you were a boy
 God, in His great mercy and love invited you into mothering
 What a generous gift!

To listen to you speak so reverently and tenderly of the wonders of breastfeeding was beautiful
 Oh what a good thing is the maternal body!
 There is a holy pride in the way our bodies can make and sustain human life
 God so dearly loves women in that we get invited to participate with Him in this act of creation

I remember the first few weeks of breastfeeding Alexandria
 Sitting half-naked on the couch with multiple pillows, towels and a tube of lanolin lotion
 Feeling so exposed and curling my toes as she tried to latch
 The nurse and my mother holding my breast and her little head
 What an ordeal that was on repeat, never ending
 What pressure, knowing that her life depended on it
 And then eventually the smooth-sailing days of pleasure and intimacy
 As I held her close and my breast milk did the marvelous task of growing her

But—these sweet little babies don't contribute much
 Like you said, they don't earn money, they don't clean up
 As newborns, they require all our attention and care
 And yet, despite their poor performance, we so love these little babies, don't we?
 It's gut-wrenching sometimes
 I know you would do anything for your babies

I think you're right—this is a picture of God's unconditional love for us
 We may not sleep through the night or contribute much to the household
 (Sometimes I feel like that colicky baby or the baby who needs skin-on-skin)
 But we are so very much loved

What a great little window mothering is
 That we get to see the unconditional love of God more clearly
 Because we know and experience unconditional love for our babies
 Imagine God gazing at you the way we gaze at our newborns
 So proud, so full of love
 Imagine God saying – *I'd do anything for you*
 Which, of course, He did
 By arriving as an infant Himself

Elizabeth

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