

When I was a student at William and Mary in the early 80s, two women in our Catholic Student Association began agitating for change in our worship services. Instead of just “brothers,” they wanted us to say “brothers and sisters” in the readings from the Bible. They wanted a woman to be the narrator for the reading of the Passion on Palm Sunday. And they wanted us to say “God” instead of “Lord” in some of the prayers. I thought they were nuts. Literal-minded, hung up on technicalities. Didn’t they understand that “brother” meant all of us? Didn’t they know that a reader’s ability is what mattered, not his gender? And why couldn’t they understand that using the word “Lord” as a form of address for God didn’t mean we thought the Divine Source of Being was literally male?

Well more than 35 years later, I’m the one agitating. Some of the things that Kim and Mary wanted have become more common. We’ve heard more about our foremothers, the women of the Bible and Christian history. We’ve seen women’s leadership grow in many branches of Christianity: reading, teaching, leading the service, preaching, confirming. But I find myself still yearning for that third request, for liturgical language that makes real what we say we know, that God is larger than any one metaphor or image, that all of us, male and female, are created in God’s image—as it says in Chapter 1 of the Bible. Thanks in part to these and other seeds that were planted at William and Mary, my journey has taken me to ordination in the Episcopal Church, and from resistance to embrace of the Sacred Feminine.

At a worship service about a dozen years after graduation, the male priest began the Communion prayer in an unusual way: “Ascribe to our God the honor due Her name; bring offerings and come into Her courts.” I was surprised by how powerful it was to hear God referred to as “Her” in a church context. The poet June Pettit captures some of what I experienced that night: “A light feeling came over me. Weight lifted and floated away. Warmth swarmed around and filled me. He had said ‘She.’ Only then did I know it had mattered.”

Turns out my “radical” classmates were right. It matters. That night I experienced the power of knowing myself to be made in God’s image. And I began to realize that all of us, men and women, have been subtly and not so subtly sabotaged by our shared custom of using exclusively male language for God. If God is only “He” and never “She,” we’re saying something profound about male and female here on earth.

“Are boys really better than girls?” a little girl asks in the book *Children’s Letters to God*. “I know you are one, but try to be fair.” Or how about this question and answer I found in a little Episcopal Q&A handbook: “Why do we call God ‘He’?” “Because that is the least inadequate pronoun we can use.” (!) But the truth is, God is not a boy’s name, and “She” is not a less adequate pronoun than “He” to use for naming divine Mystery. It is so important for us to know that in our bones.

In her book *The Dance of the Dissident Daughter*, Sue Monk Kidd writes, “When we truly grasp for the first time that the symbol of woman can be a vessel of the sacred, that it too can be an image of the

divine, our lives will begin to pivot.” My turning has been guided by many teachers and fellow students, in books and in person, at kitchen tables, in parish offices, monasteries and convents, goddess gatherings, Sophia Circles, spiritual sharing groups, workshops and retreats. My quest for female images of God has taken me into the heart of my Christian tradition, not away from it.

The Bible, it turns out, is full of such imagery, hidden in plain sight. Yes, masculine images predominate—Father, King, Lord—and they’re the ones we mostly use for worship. But they’re not the only metaphors—there are male and female, along with non-human, alternatives if you know where to look. Here’s the theologian Elizabeth Johnson’s list of some of Scripture’s names and images for God: “dairymaid, shepherd, farmer, laundress, construction worker, potter, fisherman, midwife, merchant, physician, bakerwoman, teacher, writer, artist, nurse, metal worker, homemaker . . . roaring lion, hovering mother bird, angry mother bear, protective mother hen . . . light, cloud, rock, fire, refreshing water, and life itself.”



Here’s a beautiful image of a cosmic Mother, bringing to mind Psalm 131, where the soul calms and quiets itself “like a child upon its mother’s breast.” In the Book of Isaiah, God says, “I will cry out like a woman in labor, I will gasp and pant,” and later promises to comfort Israel as a mother comforts her child. In the New Testament Jesus picks up on this

tradition when he says of Jerusalem, “How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!”

The most frequent female image in the Bible is hidden in the Hebrew word “*rachamim*” which we translate as God’s compassion or mercy, “steadfast love.” The root of that word is “*rechem*” which means womb. So over and over again, throughout the Psalms and elsewhere, God’s love for us is named as “womb-love”—the love of a mother who would never forget her child. From Isaiah chapter 30, “The Holy One waits to be gracious to you; God will rise up to show mercy (*rachamim*, womb-love) to you. For the Holy One is a God of justice; blessed are all those who wait for Her” (*my translation*). The image of God’s maternal love has gone underground in Christian tradition, but it’s still there. Six hundred years ago, the English mystic Julian of Norwich wrote, “As truly as God is our Father, so as truly God is our Mother.”

But there’s more! Here’s a depiction of Wisdom, a female face of God’s presence and activity appearing in the biblical Book of Proverbs and other Jewish texts that Roman Catholic and Anglican tradition accept as canon. Wisdom was there at creation, “when



God drew a circle on the face of the deep,” She says, “then I was beside him, like a master worker, rejoicing in the inhabited world and delighting in the human race.” Wisdom cries out in the street, leading, provoking, challenging. She is intelligent, holy, all-powerful, more beautiful than the sun, more mobile than any motion, pervading and penetrating and renewing all things, in every generation passing into holy souls and making them friends of God and prophets. She reaches mightily from one end of the earth to the other, and she orders all things well.

The gospels make very strong links between Wisdom and Jesus, suggesting that his followers saw a deep connection between them. Jesus calls himself and John the Baptist Wisdom’s children, and her themes of seeking and finding, darkness and light, and feasting on bread and wine flow through his life and teaching. Like Wisdom, Jesus calls out to the heavy burdened to come to him and find rest (Matthew 11:28-30), makes people friends of God (John 15:15), and gives life to those who love him (John 17:2). For his early followers, Jesus seemed to embody many of Wisdom’s characteristics—and they did not see this as a contradiction or competition with seeing him as the Word of God (Logos), or Messiah, King, Lord, Son of David or Son of God. It was just another lens for seeing and understanding who Jesus was.

Saint Paul calls him the power of God and the wisdom of God, and later in the third century Origen wrote, “We believe that the very Word of the Father, the Wisdom of God himself, was enclosed within the limits of that man who appeared in Judea; nay more, that God’s Wisdom entered a woman’s womb, was born as an infant, and wailed like crying children.” A hundred years later St. Augustine said in a sermon, “She is sent in one way that she may be with human beings; she has been sent in another way that she herself might be a human being.” In Istanbul, the sixth-century Cathedral of Hagia Sophia—Holy Wisdom—celebrated its patronal feast on Christmas Day. Wisdom is even mentioned in a familiar Christmas carol: “O Come thou Wisdom from on high, who orders all things mightily.” Wisdom, just like Emmanuel, one of Jesus’ names.



And then there’s the Holy Spirit, the Giver of Life, shown here as in Genesis as a wind from God sweeping over the face of the waters. Traditionally imaged as a dove, a symbol anciently associated with female divinity, the Holy Spirit has a splashy elemental signature: fire, wind, wings. The Spirit is the creative and freeing power of God let loose in the world (Johnson), hovering on those anointed or

appointed by God, inspiring, guiding, encouraging speech. And especially in the East, the Spirit was commonly referred to with female language, as in this Syrian prayer: “The world considers you a merciful mother. Bring with you calm and peace, and spread your wings over our sinful times.” So it’s totally legitimate to say, as I do in church when we recite the Nicene Creed, “She is worshipped and glorified. She has spoken through the prophets.”

So I encourage you, as I have my students and parishioners over the years, to play with these unfamiliar female images, to experiment with different language, different names, different ways of thinking about God. It's safe, it's not heretical—God can take it! And it's good for women, and men, and for the world. First of all, changing up our language and images for God helps us remember that they are *images*. Whenever we talk about God we are using symbols, metaphors, similes: Rock of Ages, the Way, the Truth and the Life. I'm not here to convince you to go to worship or to pray—that's another talk—but whether you do or not, you probably have picked up religious images from your childhood or just from the culture. I'm not trying to get you to replace the male images, which would be just as unbalanced, or to eliminate any gendered names for God, to use only neutral words which I think depersonalizes our prayer and worship. But I hope you will add in some female imagery to the library and art collection in your head, heart, and soul.

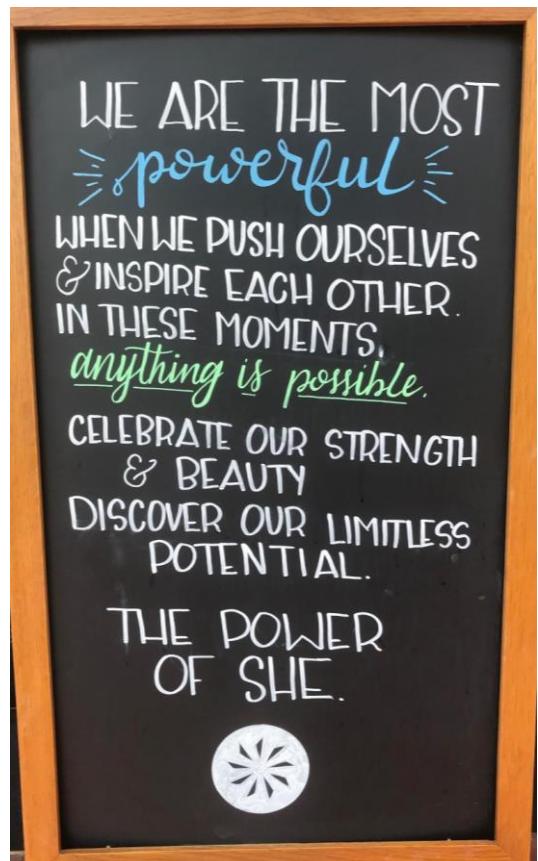
Secondly, let's not reproduce our earthly stereotypes in talking about divine reality. God as Mother is no more always sweet and tame than human mothers; Wisdom raises her voice at the busiest corner; and the Holy Spirit isn't always the peacemaker of the Trinity. Sometimes She stirs up trouble, inspiring truth-telling and liberation, opposing unity based on injustice. The spiritual gifts of balancing our God talk with female images include the traditional ones like joy, peace, and patience, but also self-determination, risk, resistance, willfulness, defiance, courage, confrontation, conflict, and voice (Victorin-Vangerud).

Expanding our words and pictures of God is about embracing wholeness—in ourselves, in our relationships, workplaces, communities, our society. Our lopsided practice of exclusively male language for divinity distorts our humanity. You may have heard of a recent study showing that women who grew up with female clergy had higher self-esteem as adults.

Vicarious leadership experience, someone called it in yesterday's panel discussion: seeing someone who looks like you in a leadership position fosters your own capacity for leadership. Well, imagine the effect on our self-esteem of vicarious experience with the biggest female role model of them all! Better yet, don't just imagine it—practice it. Start small with a few well-placed pronouns. Claim your birthright as a beloved vessel of the sacred, made in the image of God.

Long after I had named this talk—and long before I finished writing it—I came across this signboard outside a store in Boulder, Colorado that sums up what I hoped to say. "We are the most powerful when we push ourselves and inspire each other. In these moments, anything is possible. Celebrate our strength and beauty. Discover our limitless potential.

The Power of She.



## Companions for the Journey: Words and Images

**Clarissa Pinkola Estes** *Women Who Run with the Wolves: Myths and Stories of the Wild Woman Archetype; Untie the Strong Woman: Blessed Mother's Immaculate Love for the Wild Soul*

**Carol Lee Flinders** *At the Root of this Longing: Reconciling a Spiritual Hunger and a Feminist Thirst; Enduring Grace: Living Portraits of Seven Women Mystics*

**Elizabeth A. Johnson** *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse; Friends of God and Prophets: A Feminist Theological Reading of the Communion of Saints*

**Sue Monk Kidd** *The Dance of the Dissident Daughter: A Woman's Journey from Christian Tradition to the Sacred Feminine; The Secret Life of Bees*

**Caitlin Matthews** *Sophia: Goddess of Wisdom, Bride of God; Celtic Devotional: Daily Prayers and Blessings; The Celtic Spirit: Daily Meditations for the Turning Year*

**Shiloh Sophia McCloud** [shilohsophiastudios.com](http://shilohsophiastudios.com)

**Janet McKenzie** *Holiness & the Feminine Spirit*

**Jan L. Richardson** *Sacred Journeys: A Woman's Book of Daily Prayer; In Wisdom's Path: Discovering the Sacred in Every Season; In the Sanctuary of Women; [janrichardson.com](http://janrichardson.com)*

**Steven Shakespeare** *Prayers for an Inclusive Church*

**Holly Sierra** [hollysierra.com](http://hollysierra.com)

**Josephine Wall** [josephinewall.co.uk](http://josephinewall.co.uk)

**Hannah Ward, Jennifer Wild, Janet Morley** *Celebrating Women*

**Nancy M. Victorin-Vangerud** *The Raging Hearth: Spirit in the Household of God*

