

God-as-parent is a radical metaphor

It's not possible to parent without experiencing risk, weakness, pain, and transformation.

by [Debie Thomas](#) in the [May 4, 2022](#) issue



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My youngest child turns 20 this month, which feels like a milestone. No more teenagers in the house! Everyone's an adult (sort of)! We've officially launched our kids!

Those exclamation points are in earnest; I have much to celebrate, and much to be grateful for. At the same time, I'm feeling tender and pensive. Like Mary in Luke 2, I'm pondering many things in my heart. What have the last two decades meant? Who was I when I became a mother, who have I become since, and who will I become now? Most of all, I'm pondering the bewildering business of letting go. My children are out in the world now. How will I bear the uncertainties of that?

Spiritually, this tender time has led me to contemplate one of the Bible's central metaphors for God: God as parent, as father and mother. This is a metaphor I've

always taken for granted, but now I'm freshly curious, hungry to know more about the paternal and maternal faces of God.

Thankfully, the Bible gives me plenty to work with. "How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God!" (1 John 3:1). "Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you" (Isaiah 49:15). "Like an eagle that stirs up its nest, that flutters over its young, spreading out its wings, catching them, bearing them on its pinions, the Lord alone guided him" (Deuteronomy 32:11). "How often have I longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing" (Luke 13:34). "I will bellow like a woman in labor, I will gasp and pant" (Isaiah 42:14). "In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you" (John 14:2).

This small sampling reveals so much. The God these passages describe loves his children wildly and without restraint. She has a long memory; she holds the stories of her babies. He resists complacency and insists on courage, growth, and risk-taking. She does so with wisdom; she hovers, launches, supports, and guides. He longs to give and receive affection and aches when his children refuse his embrace. She groans in labor, giving herself over to shattering pain to bring new life into the world. He keeps house, honoring the diversity of his children by preparing not one room but many rooms for his children to return to and call home.

What strikes me most about these images of God-as-parent is God's vulnerability. In a beautiful reflection on Isaiah 42:14, [Lauren Winner describes it this way](#): "The point is not just that God is vulnerable, although that itself is startling. The point is that in the struggles of labor, we can learn what strength is. If our picture of strength is a laboring woman, then strength is not about refusing to cry or denying pain. Strength is not about being in charge, or being independent, or being dignified. If our picture of strength is a laboring woman, then strength entails enduring, receiving help and support, being open to pain and risk."

I remember giving birth as one of the most empowering and vulnerable-making experiences of my life. I was stunned by what my body could do, as well as by my need for the love and knowledge of those who accompanied me. During those grueling hours in the delivery room, I was simultaneously powerful and powerless. Alone and surrounded. Fierce and fragile. I can't think of a better, more radical metaphor for God's paradoxical strength.

Looking back now over my years of parenting, I can see that vulnerability has been the name of the game all along. My cocky sense of certainty ended seconds after my daughter was born. I couldn't get her to breastfeed. Or sleep through the night. I didn't know what to do when she cried. As she got older, she asked questions I couldn't answer. She had opinions I found bewildering. She faced challenges I couldn't fix. Every moment of pain, fear, loneliness, or defeat she and her little brother experienced resounded inside of me, a deafening gong. To give myself over to mothering was to know powerlessness like I'd never known it before. Yes, I had authority and strength. But my strength never canceled out my vulnerability.

Is God's experience similar? I was taught that God is unchanging, transcendent, all-knowing, all-powerful. But the truth is, it's not possible to parent without experiencing risk, weakness, pain, and transformation. It is not possible to offer up your own body as nourishment, or to nudge your frightened child out of the nest, or to carry your reckless young on your outstretched wings, or to watch your children refuse your protection, or to offer first-rate hospitality in the full knowledge that it might be rejected—and not embrace vulnerability as a way of life. If God is indeed our parent, then God daily puts God's heart at risk for the sake of love.

In this tender season of my life, I'm grateful to be in good company as a mother. Whatever else God might be, God is a parent who knows what it costs to hold and what it costs to let go. I'm grateful for a vulnerable God who births, nurses, loves, guides, and launches us, her heart on the line until we learn to fly, choose our course, and make our way home.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "God's vulnerable strength."