

# GOD LOOKS LIKE ME

Amelia Hollingsworth

I am a young mother. My arms have been full of *putti* almost exclusively for the past several years. I've done the work of mothering full-time for nearly the last decade of my life, and it was past time now for a vacation. Not the unpaid overtime of schlepping my brood to a different location and juggling the upheaval of the routine, not to mention everyone else's personal effects, but a real vacation. A "kid-ectomy," as my aunt calls it.

So I found myself standing alone in the north aisle of St. Paul's Cathedral in London, England. My husband was wandering around looking for Lord Nelson's tomb. I was staring at a sculpture by Henry Moore called *Mother and Child*. The audio guide I was given told me that it was okay to explore the themes of family and maternal love or to contemplate Mary and the baby Jesus. Photos aren't allowed in the cathedral, so I wasn't preoccupied with documenting Moore's work or dodging photobombs. I was undistracted, engrossed in the art, and that sculpture, with its fluid lines and abstract beauty, got me all misty. I wanted to contemplate the virgin mother and her baby who saved the world in a sacred space. I needed that permission.

I nearly fell over when one of the gentlemen in the St. Paul's Cathedral blazers told a little group of tourists, "You can touch it. The artist intended for people to interact with this sculpture." Part of the beauty of this art was that it was immediately accessible.

I spent quite a bit of time in the north choir aisle. We were waiting for an alternate access to the Whispering Gallery to open. And while I waited, I watched an installation entitled *Mary*, which is a video triptych by Bill Viola. And I further contemplated Mary and her son.

Jesus is Mary's son. We talk endlessly in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints about how Jesus is the literal Son of God. Fine. But

until I stood in St. Paul's Cathedral, I never thought about how Jesus is the literal, physical, emotional son of a woman like me. Wouldn't focusing on Jesus' earthly mother somehow demean him?

But for the rest of my life, I need to talk about how Jesus is Mary's son. How Jesus is the product of Mary's body and her care and love and her endless, thankless role of being his mother. Bill Viola's art casts several different women to represent Mary at different points in her life. The work starts with Mary breastfeeding baby Jesus. The work ends in a *pietà*, with Mary holding her son's dead body. And watching this art, which was beautiful but also jarring because I'm not used to installations like these in sacred spaces, reminded me of a feeling I've had for a long time now as a woman in the restored Church of Jesus Christ: I am invisible. My leaders, being all men, don't get it. They never will. They will never understand life from my point of view. They would never cast me to play an important role in Church leadership, local or regional. So it was no surprise that my mother, a converted Catholic and not a General Authority, said, "Only Mary had to fulfill the sacrifice of Abraham. There was no ram in the thicket waiting for her." It was also my mother's speechlessness for Michelangelo's *Pietà* that instilled in me a deep respect for art.

My Church leaders insist that the Godhead is made up of three male deities, all of them separate: God the Father, Christ the Son, and the Holy Spirit. There is no room in that picture for the mother of God, or any mother. There are no beautiful sculptures of mothers holding their infants in our glorious temples or serviceable meeting houses. Maybe at Christmas we can show a small print of Mary and baby Jesus, but only if there is an army of shepherds around her and male seraphim in the sky, with Joseph prominently included, of course.

Watching general conference, it is apparent that none of my leaders look like me. They are all men who grew up decades ago in a culture where everyone pretended that single-family incomes were the ideal. There are a few token women who speak from the pulpit, but they are

grandmas. They don't look like me. Their voices are not mine. Their dyed gray hair is perfectly styled and has neither spit-up nor split ends marring it. They are plagued by nostalgia for their parenting glory days. They speak of children with an abundance of sentimentality. As my own children insist on scrambling on top of me and then fighting about whose turn it is to cuddle Mommy, I cannot understand.

My church doesn't see me. They tell me to hide in a smelly, poopy diaper-infested room as I breastfeed my babies. They tell me to drop my kids off with a couple of "priesthood holders" and a handful of battered toys so I can attend a Relief Society activity about family scripture study. They want me to serve only with children or other women, but only to do what they say. And to be patient, and to please be cheerful, and for goodness' sake, to have more faith.

The day after visiting St. Paul's, my husband and I made a day trip to Paris. I cried uncontrollably about this days later as we rode the airport shuttle bus back to our long-term parking at LAX. I went to Paris. I've wanted to go to Paris since studying Gothic architecture in seventh grade because I wanted to see the Notre Dame Cathedral for myself. I wanted to see flying buttresses, rose windows, pointed arches, gargoyles, and an abundance of Gothic sculptures. I wanted to step inside and touch columns and smell and listen. I don't know precisely why this building appealed so much to me. I thought it was cool since I was a preteen. It's a bit like not understanding why your favorite color is yellow. It just is.

Before I set off on my European vacation, my dad told me that Notre Dame's interior was disappointing. He said it was dark, old, and dirty inside. I didn't care. I still had to see it.

I wasn't disappointed. Dark and dingy is not how I would describe it. The interior had the same chiaroscuro effect as some of my favorite Renaissance paintings. It heightened the beauty of the stained-glass windows. I was pulled almost trance-like toward them. I wandered down the nave toward the choir until I stumbled over some chairs and

guide ropes and realized that I should follow the carpet down the aisle like most of the other visitors.

Inside Notre Dame there are sculptures. On the north aisle there is a particularly fine sculpture of Mary and baby Jesus. And that's when I lost it. Because someone had taken the scale and scope of the cathedral and put it into a life-size stone statue of a woman and her child. And what I saw was familiar—Mary looked like me, or my sister, or any one of my girlfriends with their chubby babies—but also divine and mysterious. And that idea that the divine was real and known but also fathomless, that it was as incredible as the cathedral that I was standing in, and that the divine could be embodied by a mother and her child, that it could look like me, well, that moved me to tears.

I cried some of my most meaningful and ugly tears in Notre Dame. Because I knew Mary. I knew what it felt like to hold a baby, filled with joyful exuberance, at the cusp of toddlerhood, excited to explore the world, arms outstretched to welcome the adoration of family and strangers alike. That's what I'd been up to for the last decade of my life.

In Europe, I found the divine feminine in abundance. I saw myself and my identity reflected in a tradition of art that spans thousands of years. The Louvre had treasures for me, too. Leonardo da Vinci's *The Virgin and Child with Saint Anne* was a notable one. I saw again and again that the divine feminine, the mother of God herself, was an important, integral component of art, spirituality, and worship.

And I felt seen.

This weekend, my four-year-old came inside, his face full of purpose and curiosity. "Mommy, do you actually see me?"

My little one's eyes were fixed unblinking on my own.

"Sarah says I'm invisible. But I'm really not. Can you tell her that I'm not invisible because you actually see me?"

My child had condensed years and years of my personal prayers into a couple of simple questions.

The answer did not come from inside my faith tradition but in the art I found in European cathedrals that I now include in my own

personal tent of Christian discipleship. I realize that contemplation on the divine feminine as embodied by Mary is not strictly a practice in keeping with our church's theology. But I venerate Mary just the same. If we can venerate modern-day prophets and sing songs of praise about Brother Joe, then why can't I do the same for Mary? Why can't I contemplate what she did at the cross? Because masterpieces like Michelangelo's *Pietà* don't happen just because.

And masterpieces like that change the world.

Why can't we as members of Christ's church make more space for Mary and her baby who grew into a toddler and was once a preschooler (and oh yes, the risen Lord, Jesus Christ) in our places of worship? Why can't we wonder how many of the parables that Jesus taught us were stories his mother had told him at bedtime?

Leonardos and Moores and Violas don't create art that explores the divine feminine just because it's quaint. Artists don't bottle up lightning to strike us again and again for generations just because they are talented. They do it because they feel things. They do it because they must, because they have something to say that can't be put into words. Our church places so much importance on talking. Our times in the mountains when we feel God riding on our shoulders, baptizing us once again with steady, inescapable sunlight until we are holy and it is as commonplace and comfortable as a sandwich and Diet Coke by the lake are supposed to be shared in tidy (though tearful if need be) sentences over a pulpit. But the words are a poor translation. Yet we insist on words. Even our prayers must be spoken, even when all we have are tears.

How do you convince your children that they are seen? How do you validate them as important members of your family and inherently worthwhile and significant? I don't think it is by insisting that something is wrong with them if they feel they are invisible. I don't think it is by ignoring their questions or their desire to see people like them reflected in their leadership. I don't think it is by whispering with embarrassment about a secret mother God or singing the same hymn now and then about her.

My son, who is a tactile learner just as much as I am a visual learner, would not be served by a trip to a mirror and a discussion about our mutual reflections. He pulled me away from my desk and, pudgy hand in mine, marched me outside to his older sister, who was giggling on the swing. I scooped my son up. “Sarah, if Aaron is invisible, who am I holding?” Aaron giggled joyfully. I kissed the top of his head and then tickled Aaron’s tummy. “If Aaron is invisible, who is laughing?”

Notre Dame: our lady. I’m part of that “notre” now. I claim Mary as mine too. And I want more of her presence, which for me represents the divine feminine more eloquently than essays on LDS.org or the hymn “O My Father,” in my sacred places. And I want different media there too—because sculpture, installation, architecture, and painting all helped me feel seen when for so long I’d felt invisible. I want different styles because Carl Heinrich Bloch, Greg Olsen, and Arnold Friberg translations aren’t working for me. Why not imagine Ammon and Abish as shepherds from this century? Why not create installations symbolizing the miracles we believe God still works today?

Mary is the mother of God. You cannot be a Christian and dispute this fact. Jesus is her son by way of the miracle of the Virgin Birth, which, again, I believe holds water for members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. For the rest of my life, when the triangle of the godhead comes up, I will wonder if its shape should be expanded to that of a square. But I also don’t believe that knowing God can be explained in the Latter-day Saint fashion. It’s fuzzier. It’s better explained by fluid shapes and abstract sculptures, or the precision and beauty of a sparrow on top of a gargoyle, or the way sunlight bathes a woman in rose light when it comes through a triumph of colored glass. And still, I believe now that God can be embodied by a young woman and her baby. I believe very much that God can be described as the love of a mother for her child. In fact, I believe that this image of the Madonna and Child is a more accurate depiction of the power of God than even a cross or empty tomb.

I've been told for years and years that man was made in the image of God, and ain't that grand? I was supposed to put the mental spin that "man" means "mankind," humanity in general, but even so, I felt excluded. And it bothered me. Where am I, God? What about me and my ovaries and my boobs that are still leaking milk?

Standing in Notre Dame that day, a building that in its very name venerates a woman, Our Lady—Mary, the holy mother of our brother Jesus—I could say with all certainty that I, a woman, am made in the image of God. And God looks like me.

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