

The Hope for Love...The Fear of Loss
Matthew 1:18-25; Luke 1:39-45
December 20, 2009

A pastor was addressing the children during the Christmas service. “Who is the mother of Jesus?” he asked them.

Without hesitation, dozens of tiny voices chorused back, “Mary.”

“That’s right. Now who is the father of Jesus?”

There was quiet and fidgeting. After all, no one had told them there was going to be a quiz. Then a young girl spoke up. With assurance, she boldly announced, “It’s Virg.”

There were several seconds of silence. Then she explained, “You know, Jesus’ parents, Virg an’ Mary.”ⁱ

Imagine how startled Joseph must be when he hears Mary’s news! Mary and Joseph are already engaged. The custom of the day deems an engagement as a legally binding agreement essentially sealing a couple as husband and wife. However, because they are not yet living together, an act of unfaithfulness is considered adultery. The relationship can only be dissolved by death or divorce.

Joseph is faced with a difficult choice. He has the reputation of being a righteous man, one who lives by the law, by the revealed will of God. As a just man, Joseph must terminate the relationship not out of anger but out of deep religious conviction. No matter how much Joseph still loves Mary, his religious obligation is to annul the marriage contract because it is apparent that she is guilty of a crime. It is not his prerogative to forgive her.

Joseph has two options. He can make Mary suffer the full consequences of the law, which would mean the loss of her love and perhaps the loss of her life. The other choice is to quietly divorce her so as to reduce her humiliation. Either choice entails for Joseph the loss of Mary and his dreams of a family with her. The prospect of this loss is devastating. Although his pain is great, he chooses to take the least harmful action for Mary. He decides to divorce her quietly in order to preserve more of her dignity. In this way he can demonstrate both his love of God and his care for Mary. He chooses compassion over justice.

It is only after his decision that the angel appears in a dream, assuring Joseph, “Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife.” The angel explains that this is the work of God. As a righteous man, Joseph will want to accept the child as his own and adopt him into the family of David. Joseph obeys the angel’s command and names the child “Jesus” as instructed.

Mary and Joseph both will continue to experience a loss of face as they move through the birth and rearing of this child. The larger story of which this birth is a part will not be revealed to others until far later in their lives.

Nevertheless, they both offer themselves to the call of God without fear, but trusting their lives to holy purposes and possibilities. They are able to endure the consequences of their divine calling because they trust in the safety net of God's love and mercy. Their fear of loss is met by the hope of love, the love of God and the love of this holy child.

Anne Lamott took her two-year-old son to Lake Tahoe where they stayed in a condominium by the lake. Because of all the gambling in the area, the rooms are equipped with curtains and shades that block out every speck of light so you can stay up all night in the casinos and then sleep all morning. One afternoon she put the baby to bed in his playpen in one of those rooms in the pitch dark, and went to do some work. A few minutes later she heard her baby knocking on the door from inside the room. She got up, knowing he'd crawled out of his playpen. She went to put him down again, but when she got to the door, she found he'd locked it.

He had somehow managed to push the little button on the doorknob. He was calling to her, "Mommy, Mommy," and Anne was saying to him, "Jiggle the door knob, darling." Of course he couldn't even see the knob to know what she was talking about. After a moment, it became clear to him that his mother could not open the door, and panic set in. He began sobbing. So his mother ran around like crazy trying everything, trying to get the door to work, calling the rental agency where she left a message, calling the manager where she left another message, and running back to check her son every minute or so. And there, in this dark, locked room was her terrified little child.

Finally she did the only thing she could, which was to slide her fingers underneath the door, where there were a few centimeters of space. She kept telling him over and over to bend down and find her fingers. And somehow he did.

So they stayed like that for a really long time, connected, on the floor, him holding her fingers in the dark, and slowly feeling connected, feeling her love, feeling her presence and her care.ⁱⁱ

Mary and Joseph are able to move through their loss of face, through the startling unexpected change of plans because they feel connected to the love of God. They too probably feel as though they are groping in the dark, holding on to a single thread of hope. As slender as it is, it is a connection to love, a love that never fails, a love that is trustworthy and steadfast.

Sometimes we need to experience loss in order to embrace the greater love God has in store for us. When faith is the major influence in our lives, we look past traditional form and formula, as Joseph does. Instead of becoming paralyzed by the fear of loss, we can respond to unpredictable events with the faith that God is doing something new, even in chaotic circumstances. When we can dare to let go of the fear of loss, we open ourselves to the God of extraordinary possibilities.

It's one of the paradoxes of the Christian faith which Jesus spoke of when he said, "Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it" (Matthew 16:25). When we lose something, even something of great value, we surprisingly find that a new thing of great value is born in its place. When we allow our fears to be met by hope, our losses will be consumed by the love of God.

There is a true story of two elderly women who found a unique way to move beyond the fear of loss and live into the hope of love. A couple traveling through New England spotted a sign in a yard that simply read: "Antiques." They stopped and went into the house and were greeted by two elderly matrons. The women invited them into the living room for tea. After a pleasant conversation the man asked if they could see the antiques. One of the women sheepishly said, "You're looking at them." By her answer she meant not that the furniture in the room were the antiques, but rather that the women themselves were!

She explained that when they had moved to his town, they were already getting on in years and had no friends. They rarely had company and were lonely. So they hit on the idea of the sign, hoping that people would stop in and visit. The plan had worked better than they could have hoped. They made permanent friends; there were people who stopped by every now and then. Soon their friends stopped by each time they passed through town—just to see their "antique" friends. The housemate commented that they never intended to deceive anyone and had not really advertised that there was anything for sale. She then added, "I hope God will forgive us for our little ruse, and we hope that you aren't angry with us."ⁱⁱⁱ

These two women moved beyond their loss of relationships and creatively opened themselves to the possibilities God would provide. Their loss was met by love found in new relationships formed in a most unique and imaginative way.

Everyday we are given gifts which flow into loss which flow into new gifts. In letting go of our preconceived ideas or plans, in growing into acceptance of our losses, as did Joseph and Mary, we can open ourselves to fresh unexpected gifts from God. Our fear of loss is met by the hope of love, the love of God. God's love is so trustworthy that God dared to come in human form, to slide a finger under the door into our darkened world, that we might have a hand to hold while we wait for light to dawn, for doors to open, and new possibilities to arrive. May your fear of loss be met by the hope of God's astonishing, life-giving love.

Eternal Love, Source of Life and Joy, we praise you for the gift of your Holy Child, Jesus the Christ. We marvel at his ministry of compassion and justice. We rejoice in the powerful force of new life which raised him from death and which raised many others to new life.

We bring to you our fears, our fear of failure, our fear of vulnerability, our fear of loss and change. Send your Christmas angels with your word of assurance, “Do not be afraid, for I bring you tidings of great news for all people.” May our fears be met with your gift of hope, the hope of approval, the hope of safety, the hope of love.

We seek your hopeful presence for those who dwell in the darkness of despair, disease, poverty, and conflict. Shine your rays of hope into their lives. Open to them the doors of opportunity and possibility that they might know and experience your gift of new life.

Beam your Spirit of Peace upon our world leading your people on the pathways of reconciliation. Offer your protection to military troops who seek the safety and welfare of others.

Abide with those whose pain is sharpened this holiday season. Comfort those who feel the absence of loved ones. Bring peace to relationships that are estranged. May your presence fill the emptiness of one who is lonely.

May your gift of love and faith be born anew in our hearts and in all hearts this season. We pray in the name of the Holy Child, who taught us to pray together...

ⁱ *Homiletics*, December 2005, p. 59.

ⁱⁱ Anne Lamott, *Operating Instructions* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1994), pp. 88-89.

ⁱⁱⁱ Willard “Buzz” Stevens, quoted in *Lectionary Homiletics*, Dec 2003, p. 16.