

Advent: Love & Longing

Terri Lynn Friesen – December 9, 2018

I first dreamed that this opportunity to speak during advent might be a really beautiful exposition on the Magnificat, or Mary's song. I have heard expectant friends preach before in Advent, and the combination of their articulate speech, their strength, and their vulnerability was very moving. I thought my hormones would surge, my insights would become as powerful as my sense of smell, and hopefully I would come up with something great.

So, back in October, looked at the lectionary texts, I told Patty I wanted to preach on this passage, and hoped she wouldn't guess why just yet.

But before I go any further, I wanted to preface this reflection with a disclaimer – although this is the place where I'm coming from today – this is NOT a reflection on parenthood. This was a reflection – for me - about being a created and a creative being – and how we relate to the Creator and to our own creations. I think that many of these thoughts could carry over to creating art or any project or dream that is driven by our passions – and so I invite you to listen from wherever the Spirit is meeting your reality today.

And with that I'll go back to the text that was read earlier (Luke 1:46-55).

I don't know when it became my favourite, but I have loved these words of Mary for many years. I think more than the words themselves, I've loved what they represent: for Mary herself, for the political climate that she finds herself in - young Jewish woman, in the midst of an occupied nation who has been waiting hundreds of years for Someone - and for the trajectory she proclaims of who God is, and what God is about – bringing renewal and right relationship with all of Creation.

I've loved it for the set-up to the nativity: that this birth is a strange ushering in of a new way of being in the world. It's in the rejoicing in God's justice, in the now and not-yet-ness of all that Jesus represents for the people of God. The beauty for me, in this passage is in the longing. 2

And so as I've re-considered Mary's words in this season, I've come to realize that being pregnant doesn't entitle me to the particular insights that I thought it might about the Magnificat, Except, perhaps, for this:

That this passage was just as applicable, maybe even more so – to my not-yet-pregnant self. Because this passage is about longing and fervent and hopeful anticipation. I have had seasons of great longing – either in my own life or for the world – that this permission that Mary gives us to express longing - seemed keenly appropriate and needed. As I dwelled in these words:

You have '...lifted high the lowly. You have filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. You have come to the aid of Israel your servant; you have remembered your mercy" (Luke 1:52b-54, translation prepared by Mary Shultz) I thought more about seasons of my life filled with other kinds of longings, but also of friends and family who are living through infertility, and have had miscarriages, and I began to think about the intertwining of the relationship between longing and love.

- I thought about what it means to love something or someone that is not yet?
- I thought about those in seasons of aching disappointments, of waking hours of wondering, of risky hoping.
- I wondered about the possibility of losing this baby early on in the pregnancy – what then would I have to say about embodied hope and longing?
- And I thought about the women in our biblical narrative whose decades of longing are often only briefly mentioned - Sarah and Rebekah and Rachel and Hannah.

These are thoughts that have lead me to wonder how expansive what we call LOVE really is, and THAT is the spring board to this reflection.

It is not news that the English language really fails us in substituting love for the more specific words that we find in other tongues. The evolution of texting and emoticons – though handy - have probably made it worse for us. 3

Greek thought used four words to describe love: the familial or affectionate love (storge); friendship (philia); romantic love (eros); and spiritual love (agape). But I feel like the place or emotions that I am wondering about are even more specific than these: love that is not yet embodied. The love that goes hand in hand with longing and hope. What do you call this love, a love that precedes a reality? 'Creative love' was the first thing that came to mind (as I was brushing my teeth one day, not that creative, I know) – the open-handed imagination and bond that one has to another, before it even exists. To love something/someone not because of anything they are, but because of the vast potential of all that could be, of the delight of the imagination of their mere existence, and because of the connection that we have to their createdness.

And as I tried to string these thoughts together, and as I thought about artists and their works not yet created, or of those that long for children, the image that almost immediately came to mind was a picture of "the Spirit of God hovering over the surface of the waters" (Gen. 1:2b). It's a very unspecific picture, quite likely informed by art inspired by Genesis, or pictures in my Dad's copy of the Pale Blue Dot.

Was this Creative Love?

If babies are formed in such strange and miraculous ways, is it heretical to wonder that there might be great longing and creative love in the way the universe came together?

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, 2 the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. 3 Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light. 4a And God saw that the light was good (Genesis 1:1-4a).

In the gathering of dust and the breathing of life (whatever that looked like, it's beside the point), in the creating of stars and planetary systems, or oceans and mountains and dragonflies and palm trees and lichen... is it anthropomorphizing God – to think that there might have been longing and deep risk and wondering? It could be, but God called this 'good', and that – I'd risk to say – is an emotional investment. 4

But do we consider ourselves as created and loved in this wild, deep and risky way?

To even begin to have a comparable metric of this kind of love, we often draw from our experience of such love in our human relationships: Amongst the thousand little things that my parents did that I noticed or didn't notice growing up, I had two quite vivid memories come to mind from each of my parents of this powerful, instinctual, self-forgetting love. Love that was unreasonable and kind of heroic, almost in spite of itself. The first is at a regional track and field meet, when I was warming up to run the 3000 m. I sometimes wasn't very self-aware teen, and I realized that I had pinned the number that I needed to run the race to a long-sleeve shirt that I had left in our van, and that I couldn't compete without it. And my Mom ran – in her dress sandals, so a far away parking lot – to our van, to get my number, so they would let me run the race. She didn't do it because she thought I was going to win. She did it just so that I could participate – so I could take joy in running that day.

The other occasion was my grade 11 biology class. Growing up we lived 9 and ½ miles from town, and I knew almost exactly how long it took for my Dad, who is a very cautious person and never drove faster than the speed limit, to drive to town. On this day in biology class we were talking about lamb birthing for some reason, and I passed out. I fainted and fell right off my lab stool. And within minutes, after I had come to and promised every one I was ok, my Dad was there. I don't remember much about that incident, but I distinctly remember when he rushed into the room that you could not get to town in that amount of time, and that I knew for sure that my consciousness or lack thereof was a big deal to my Dad.

These are simple, and kind of silly, but I hope that they relate to an experience that you have had – of either giving or receiving – this kind of deep, instinctive love. Often, we experience even those loves only in part, either because of brokenness in ourselves or in those with whom we are in relationship (or both). But what they point to has shifted my understanding of this mis-used and over-sentimentalized truth that God really does love this world. God loves it and us and all of Creation in a wild and deep and imaginative and risky way. A love that 5

relinquishes control because the risk of creating something deeply good is worth it.

God does not control humanity like a puppeteer, just like we do not control (despite our best efforts sometimes) who or what our children will be. We might have influence, and hopes, and longings, and will go to great lengths for their best interest – but ultimately, we do not have control over our children, which means we will watch them make beautiful and sometimes painfully poor choices.

And it is in chatting with you all, over the past week, and thinking about this eventual autonomy that children will have, that has given me a renewed hope for the state of our world (including navigating how to raise a child in it). Because I've come to the conclusion – thanks to your lived experience and encouragement – that the mystery of having children is worth it.

(I want to make sure I state clearly that this *DOES NOT* mean that I believe that having children is the ultimate goal – for most of my life I didn't imagine having my own children, and I felt at peace with that, and that there were a lot of interesting and exciting and worthwhile things that God was inviting me to, and if you ask the Apostle Paul, he makes more than one reference that he would agree).

But for those who have the desire and opportunity to enter into the challenges of parenthood, the risk is worth the beauty – even when there are no guarantees. And witnessing this has renewed my hope about our world. It's given me a renewed ability to believe that our world – broken as we experience it – is still beloved by God. In the midst of the ugliness of what we are doing to our environment, and what we have done and do to each other – this world is still beloved by God. And part of that Belovedness is creating us with the ability to choose how we respond to it. [be more personal/specific here?] And so part of work is to follow the example of Jesus, and seek justice and call out inequity. And I am always encouraged and grateful when I hear how many ways our church – as individuals and groups – is living that out. But the other part of our work is to understand and truly live out our Belovedness. Does it challenge and change us to live differently if we deeply understand that WE are created and loved in this wild, deep and risky way? In a way that God could not control, but that seemed worth it all the same? How about the rest of creation? Our oceans and our tall grass 6

prairie and our neighbours worshipping down the street – do we engage with them as also that Beloved?

I think that this is the risk that God took in creating us – that we would believe this to be true and to live it.

And when I do, I think it changes three things, and that's what I will close with: First, it changes how I relate to God. When I comprehend, even a glimpse of God's great love for all of creation, it is easier for me to pray and to offer my longings and laments because I trust that God shares those too.

Second, I think it gives us fresh eyes to see our neighbours. Because in understanding that I am deeply loved by God, but am no more special than any other part of God's good Creation, I begin to see the sacred, the image of God in all who I meet.

And finally, it empowers us to live into who we are Created to be. It roots my worth. It lets me continue to show up in this role, and learn what it means to be a pastoral presence. It is what I trust as I anticipate becoming a parent with Thomas. It lets me live without being consumed by shame for my mistakes, and emboldens me to share my gifts.

It lets me live, perhaps, with a posture like Mary's – what else were her qualifications for ending up in such a role? I don't think her role in our redemptive history is because she was particularly holy, but because she had a deep and humble understanding that she along with all of creation, was loved by God. And so, as you are invited to sink into these truths, amidst whatever longing you are carrying, I invite you to join in singing, or just to be silent and ponder these things in your heart: HWB #178: Come Thou Long Expected Jesus.