

A Hidden Sorrow

Praying through reproductive loss

BY CHRISTOPHER PRAMUK

Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you (Jer 1:5).

Several years ago my younger sister gave birth to a three-pound baby boy stricken with severe genetic anomalies. With sophisticated prenatal testing, she and her husband were about as well prepared for the birth as possible. Their single hope and prayer was that the infant, Jerry, might live long enough—a few seconds, a few minutes—to say hello, as it were, and say goodbye. They wanted to hold him and look into his eyes, however briefly, so that the child might feel and know their love for him. God willing, they would have long enough to introduce him to his two sisters, ages 2 and 4. *God willing*—the phrase still catches in my throat.

The day came, and we gathered in the delivery room to welcome the baby. With his limbs badly deformed, his breathing labored, Jerry gazed into my sister's beaming face as she held him against her, crying and smiling. He was beautiful, and for more than eight hours he fought to stay alive. Everyone around the hospital bed held him in turn: parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles and his two big sisters, beaming with delight. At last, lying on his mother's breast, with his father's hand resting gently on his head, Jerry gave

his last labored breath and lay motionless. God, it seemed, *had been willing*, and a family's humble prayer had been answered.

Four days later, we prayed at the graveside where Jerry's body, in a tiny coffin, would be laid in the earth next to his older brother, Jack. Delivered at

the revelation of how many others have been through this. After both our miscarriages it seemed that whenever we shared our news with a close friend or family member, a kind of hidden door opened behind their eyes and words would tumble forth, "I'm so, so sorry." Long pause. "You



ART: BOB WIACEK

full-term nine years earlier, Jack was stillborn, the victim of an umbilical cord accident.

Stumbling Toward Language

Jerry's death awakened painful memories. My wife and I have suffered two miscarriages. For years I have struggled to reflect prayerfully on these and on my sister's losses, experiences that have struck me to the core; largely, I have failed. What disarms me still is not just the pain of those losses but

know, we had a miscarriage two years ago. It was awful."

Another long pause, "No, we *didn't* know."

And the unspoken question arises, "Why didn't you tell us?"

In Christian and Catholic circles, a strange kind of silence, an existential and theological loneliness, surrounds these more hidden deaths. Some silences are good, healthy and holy, pregnant with hope and expectation. Something new, something beautiful

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waits to be born here. The silence following our miscarriages, however, was nothing like this. It felt like loneliness, death, crucifixion. It seemed to mock my wife and me and our desire for life, our trust in its elemental goodness.

I will not soon forget gazing at the ultrasound monitor, our excitement passing quickly into desperation as the technician gently pressed the wand, now here, now there, into my wife's exposed belly. Our son, then 4, sat close by my side, eager to see his little brother or sister "on TV," as we had described it. He soon picked up our nervous cues—the fidgeting, the expressions of disbelief—and knew something was wrong. Silence, questions, tears. Had we the slightest notion there was a problem, I never would have let my son experience that. Yet something of that painful moment, I am sure, still lives in him, something about the fragility and preciousness of life, a memory I am not sure I would take from him. Now

12, he treats our newly adopted son, 10 years his junior, like the Little Prince.

I know that as a man my experiences are very different from those of my wife or sister or of any woman who has felt the anguish of life's perishing deep in her body. We hurt in different ways. Following our second miscarriage, I anguished above all for my wife, for her bleeding body, her broken spirit; I anguished for myself, too, for my inability to understand or to help. We had already discussed names, and the nursery was nearly ready. This pregnancy had felt like a gift, a persistent prayer answered. Yet God, it seemed, *was not willing*. Why?

The best I could manage was a forced acceptance and a dawning realization that I might now begin to understand the suffering of so many other parents who had lost a child or of countless people across the world who see life snuffed out by poverty,

war or disease. Closer to home, I might better understand the wisdom of my grandmother, second of 13 children, just eight of whom reached adulthood. At 103, she shared the memory of those lost siblings, including a 14-year-old sister she adored, a great aunt I would never know.

How do we survive such losses, much less make sense of them? Can the church, our faith communities, help us grieve, protest and heal? In all of this, where is God, the one who knows every child even before we are formed in the womb?

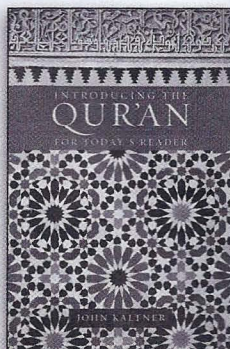
Stumbling Toward Images

Serene Jones, president of Union Theological Seminary in New York, recently published a collection of essays, *Trauma and Grace*, in which she tells the stories of women who have shared their experiences of miscarriage and stillbirth. "My womb is a deathbed, my body a grave," a woman says. And, Jones writes, "She holds in her womb the dead, imagined person whose future she has conjured. Why had her body rejected and killed the 'other' whose life she so passionately desired to nurture?"

Jones asks whether the Christian community does not hold some story, some image or memory that might relate to women's experiences of reproductive loss and bring some healing. And she suggests that the Christian community might remember the story of "a death that happens deep within God... in the very heart—perhaps the womb—of God." This is, of course, the death of Jesus.

"When Christ is crucified, God's own child dies; ...and yet by letting it happen, God also bears guilt for it," writes Jones. This image must not "encourage women to imagine their own suffering as redemptive," she cautions. Rather, "the poetic move here is to suggest a morphological space within which [women] might imagine God's solidarity with them as those

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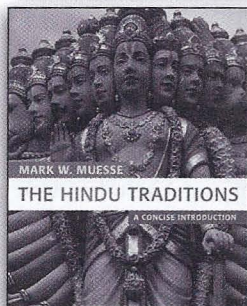
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who lose a future they had hoped for." Telling the story of God's shared mourning will not end women's sorrow, but it might "lessen their sense of isolation."

The image of the world resting, turning and flowering forth in the womb of God has long been deeply consoling and beautiful for me. To imagine the womb of God as a grave for the body of Jesus evokes a wider range of disarming but powerful associations. Mary holding her son's broken body is Christianity's classic "morphological" icon of God's maternal solidarity. And I carry with me the image of my mother, as she described it many years later, alone and bending over the sink as she "baptizes" with water and tears a mass of tissue dispelled by her womb during the course of a difficult pregnancy. That tissue, her doctor explained, was likely my twin, a life tethered to mine for a while but now reabsorbed—dare we imagine?—into the healing womb of God.

Stumbling Toward Community

These very personal imaginings are crucial for healing, but are they enough? In his book *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, Harold Kushner reflects on his son's death and asks what finally helps us survive such crippling grief. "Is it our theology," Kushner asks, "or our friends?"

For Kushner, it is the latter: "God comes to us through the incarnation of caring people," friends, family and often strangers who reach out to us. This was true for my wife and me after our miscarriages. And it continues to be true when we share our losses with others. In the very act and risk of sharing our most difficult life passages, something that once seemed impossible erupts: consolation, healing and grace.

It has not been hard for us to discover God's healing presence in the compassion of others. The question of God's providence, power and will,

however, doggedly remains. Like Kushner, I have more or less learned not to blame God for "moral evil" or even for "natural evil" like earthquakes, disease, miscarriage. Yet like Kushner I reserve my unquenchable need to cry out in protest, grief and lamentation. Kushner asks, "Can you forgive God for creating a world in which the wrong things happen to the people you love?" My head absolves God of responsibility; my heart does not. And yet I want to forgive.

Something else, though, steals in sometimes during my prayer. The prayers and rituals of Catholicism, especially its pregnant silences, show me something of that promise hidden behind the veil, even if seen "through a glass darkly": rumors of resurrection, of lives not lost forever but resting, turning, flowering forth again in the arms of Christ—like my sister's chil-

dren and like a twin with whom I shared my mother's womb. Gazing deeper into the glass, I see the children of the South Bronx, Haiti, Iraq, Darfur, once buried in the rubble of neglect or violence now raised up and playing joyfully before the gates of heaven.

It is by no means easy to rise to such faith when we feel forsaken by the very Father who has promised to remain near. But even there we must have the courage to remember and tell the story of a God who, like Mary, enfolds the suffering world in her fiercely protective arms and urges us to do the same. In the womb of such faith, perhaps we can bring our longings and unrequited hopes back to the one who consecrates us even before we are born. And in humble prayer, we might ask not only for renewed strength but for the grace and the wisdom to forgive. **A**

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