

Choosing Faith for Those Who Can't

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On November 17, 2002, three days after my unborn child was diagnosed with anencephaly, I shared the following reflection with my congregation, Central Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Terre Haute, Indiana. The next day, my husband William and I traveled to the Indiana University Medical Center where I checked into the hospital. On November 20, 2002, Micah Jones Wagnon was born and died. She was the second child we lost to this birth defect.

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Choose Faith: Matthew 25:14-30

I'm not going to preach today like I usually do. I don't think I could even if I wanted to. You probably don't want to hear a regular sermon from me today, and I thank you for that. So this is not a sermon. But I am a preacher and one of the ways I work through issues is by writing and talking. Instead of a sermon, I'd like to share a few thoughts with you.

Putting these thoughts together has actually helped me. It's helped William and me both to walk through some of the grief that we're already feeling over losing another baby to this terrible birth defect, anencephaly.

Because when something awful happens, it helps to name it, I'd like to tell you what anencephaly is. Anencephaly is a neural tube defect. When the cells of an embryo first begin to multiply, you can think of them as spreading out like a sheet of paper. The first task a forming embryo has to accomplish is to make a fold like a trough. As the cells inside this fold multiply, they become the spinal column and central nervous system. If the fold doesn't seal at the bottom of what becomes the spinal column or somewhere in the middle, the condition is called spina bifida. If the fold doesn't seal at the top of the developing spinal column, the condition is anencephaly. If the fold doesn't seal at the top, there grows no skull to protect developing brain cells, so nothing in the brain forms above the very lowest stem of the brain. There is a heartbeat. There is movement. But because the baby has no brain function and no skull, it cannot live outside the womb; it cannot even breathe on its own.

This is not a birth defect that can be corrected. Surgeons can't build a brain and a skull from nothing, and such organs do not form spontaneously. Therefore, doctors call this a birth defect that is "incompatible with life." Because this baby has absolutely no chance to live, we've decided to say goodbye this week, instead of saying goodbye five months from now. The terrible thing is that goodbye is the only possible outcome. I want to thank you for indulging my need to talk and for not making us go home to be alone with our grief. We need to be here today with you, with family. Now that I've explained something about what's happening to us, these are the thoughts I'd like to share.

Thursday morning, before the doctor's appointment at which we learned of our baby's condition, I was working with this parable of the talents in Matthew's Gospel. I focused in on the idea that when it comes to faith, we have a couple of options. We

can, like the first two servants, live into our giftedness through faith, or we can, like the third servant, live trapped in fear despite our giftedness.

According to the parable, the three servants receive large sums of money from the master before he leaves for a trip. In Jesus' day, a talent was an amount of money, not a skill like playing an instrument or a sport. A talent was roughly equal to fifteen years' wages for an average laborer. So two talents would've been about thirty years' wages, five talents about seventy-five years' wages. That's a lot of money to receive all at once. In this parable, these large sums of money given to the three servants are intended to remind us of the abundance and preciousness of the gifts God has entrusted to us.

So what do the three servants do with their abundant gifts? The first two live into their giftedness through faith. They embrace the gift with faith, they see the potential, they are willing to take risks, they invest, and their gifts are multiplied. The third servant is trapped by his fear of the master despite the abundant gift that has been entrusted to him.

That was my thinking on Thursday morning. Then later in the day my world was turned upside down—again. William and I walked around our house all day Friday in a daze, sometimes angry, sometimes crying in each other's arms, sometimes staring at each other in disbelief. And it occurred to me that William and I are faced with the same choice that was before the three servants. We can choose to live into our giftedness, or we can live in fear.

I tell you, I'm completely blown away by this happening to us again. It's like lightning striking the same spot twice. It's unbelievable. It was unbelievable five years ago when we learned that our baby at twenty weeks gestation had anencephaly and was not going to live. Now, with this baby at seventeen weeks gestation, it's just as unbelievable. It makes no sense. Part of me wants to curl up into a ball and hide in fear—from you, from the world, from God. Questions race through my mind. What does it all mean? Why is this happening? Why can't I stop it?

Part of me is afraid, deeply afraid. I'm afraid about next week, about going through the same pain we went through five years ago. I'm afraid about what it means for the future of my family. I'm afraid of the judgment that lurks out there about our decision to deliver our baby and say goodbye now, instead of waiting five months to deliver our baby and say goodbye then, even though I know we're making the best decision. I'm afraid of the sorrow and the grief that are sure to be with us again. Part of me wants to curl up into a ball and hide in fear.

But there is something that stops me from doing that. And I really don't know what to call it other than faith. For my whole life, I have embraced the giftedness of living. I've seen the cup half full, not half empty. I've been able to recognize the gifts of God around me and appreciate them and love them and put them to good use, I think. I've lived with faith that these abundant gifts are of God, and for the most part I've been able to trust that God wants us to live fully, despite the risks—and there are a great many risks in living. But faith keeps my arms flung open wide to the world. It always has. And I know that it will again this time.

So, given the choice of living into giftedness through faith or living trapped in fear, I choose faith. I want to be like the first two servants who see God's abundant gift for what it is, and despite the risk, find a way to survive and even thrive.

Choosing faith doesn't mean that I'm going to be spared the grief and the pain and

the sorrow and the doubt or even the fear. And it doesn't mean you'll be spared it either. It just means that faith and God's abundant love for us will outlast the pain and sorrow and the doubt and even the fear. And that makes choosing faith worthwhile, despite the risks that are sure to come along. I choose faith.

Thank you. Thank you for holding me in your prayers while I spoke this morning. Thank you for keeping William, Gracie, and me in your prayers this week and in the weeks to come. Amen.

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This was the most difficult sermon I have ever preached (and yes, I understand that it really was a sermon, despite my protestations). I'm not a fan of using myself as sermon material. It too easily becomes a reflection on the messenger instead of on the message. In this case, however, the messenger needed her community and the community needed her. We needed each other in order to proclaim the good news on that day. We cried through the sermon and the music, and through the Lord's Supper that concluded our worship service. I continue to give thanks for the congregation at Central Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Terre Haute, Indiana.

A few weeks after Micah died, a friend read this sermon and said that it was a like a hoarse cry of faith refusing to be silenced. That same friend later encouraged me to write about my experience. Perhaps my testimony could help other preachers who care for parents grieving the loss of a child. I agreed to try.

However, as I write this article more than a year after the death of Micah, I am aware that my cry of faith has weakened into a whisper I myself can barely hear. When I preached that sermon last year I had no idea how difficult it was going to be to continue to "choose faith." Sometimes I go back and read the sermon to remind myself of the conviction I had then, because since then I have not been so sure of my faith or of my God.

They say that most preachers have one central message they return to over and over again. Even if the preacher can proclaim the breadth and depth of the Christian faith, she has a core message that manages to work its way into most sermons. A professor of mine once theorized that this message is the one the preacher herself needs to hear. My message is grace. Unmerited, divine grace. Salvation is God's to give, not ours to earn or rebuke. God is a good God, gracious and abounding in love, the One who forgives and reconciles us through Jesus Christ when we do not deserve it (and even when we may deserve it a bit). But our faithful acts are not what guarantee divine blessing any more than our sins guarantee punishment. Salvation is God's to give freely, and God gives it graciously.

I thought this message of unmerited grace and salvation was written upon my spirit so deeply, so profoundly, that I would never waiver in my belief of it. That was before (perhaps the reason) it was put to the test.

In 1997 when I lost my first baby to anencephaly, I was devastated, hurt, and afraid. But I never questioned God. I do not believe God is in the business of directing every action and controlling every circumstance of an individual human being's life. While God is certainly omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent, God chooses to respect the free will that God has given human beings, as well as the natural laws God has established for the world. This means suffering happens. People are hurt. They die.

They abuse each other. They are killed in earthquakes and tornadoes. They suffer innumerable injustices. But God does not will their suffering. God does not cause their troubles to happen by deciding who will be hurt on which day. Instead, God works steadfastly to bring into the light all possible good that might come from terrible situations.

In 1997 I was not angry with God. I did not think God caused my baby, Zechariah, to die. I hoped instead for the good that God would help bring into the light from this suffering. And we did make it through that terrible time. My husband and I grieved and struggled and held each other through many days of tears. We moved on with our lives, our careers, and with our hopes to become parents. On August 10, 2000, Sarah Grace Jones Wagnon was born. Gracie is healthy and happy, and she continues to be the delight of our lives.

The sermon I preached on November 17, 2002, upon learning that I was carrying another baby with anencephaly reflected that earlier faith – the faith and hope I had in 1997, the faith and hope I had until after Micah died.

My grief this past year has been different. It's raw and angry, like an open wound that won't heal. I've felt lost, depressed. I've been withdrawn, confused. I'm angry at God. I've been angry at my husband, at my congregation. I've been angry at the world. But mostly I'm angry at God. And my anger at God has precipitated a deeper spiritual crisis.

I am angry at God because losing a second child to the same condition feels intentional. It feels like punishment. The second time doesn't feel like a simple consequence of the laws of nature. Researchers do not know what causes anencephaly, but they suspect a genetic defect in the mother that becomes exacerbated by environmental factors at conception or shortly thereafter. That means there is most likely something wrong with my genetic makeup. Now that my husband and I have conceived two babies with anencephaly, we are in the high-risk category. If we were to conceive a child again, there would be a ten to twenty-five percent chance that that baby would have a neural tube defect. There is something wrong with me, something I did not cause and cannot fix.

After losing Zechariah, I did all the right things for my subsequent two pregnancies. I took high doses of folic acid (thought to counteract one environmental factor associated with neural tube defects). I ate well. I exercised. I took my vitamins. I received great prenatal care. And, indeed, my daughter Gracie was born healthy!

More importantly – or so I thought apparently – I continued to live a good and faithful life, serving God in the ministry, upholding ethical teachings, preaching the Word of God, caring for the needs of others, including my family. In my devotional life, I sought ways to keep my trust in God, to follow God's way for my life.

It was in February 2003, three months after losing Micah that I finally acknowledged how angry I was with God. I was angry because I felt like I was being unjustly punished. I did what I was supposed to do. I led an upright and healthy, faithful life, and still my child was taken from me. I had a bargain with God and God didn't uphold God's end.

Not only are these ugly feelings to experience but they also counter everything I believe to be true about God and how God works in our lives. I don't think God rewards good behavior by protecting the faithful from suffering. But, darn it, why didn't God reward my good behavior by protecting me from this!

This anger has sent me into a tailspin of doubt and fear. Do I not actually believe what I thought I believed about God? I can't solve this by simply trying harder to believe what I thought I believed (as many a preacher would have me do despite the lesson of Job's friends). I can't try harder to trust the God at whom I am so angry! Instead, I want God to do something for me.

For the first time in my life, I want God to prove something to me – to demonstrate that divine love, put that grace on full display right in front of me despite my theologically incorrect and ugly feelings. It's time God stepped in to soothe my tears, to stop my retreat from the people I love, to explain why my body is defective and why my hopes are lost. It's time God stepped into to do something about this wound in my heart.

Never before have I so boldly demanded something of God. I know I stand in the tradition of the psalmists who yell and scream at God. I know that God is big enough to take my ranting and raving. But for some reason I can't get to the end of the psalm where devotion to God is once again affirmed! I can't go with David from his desperate plea, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Ps 22:1) to his triumphal proclamation "All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the Lord" (Ps 22:27).

Never before have I so boldly demanded something of God. And frankly, I don't know if God has responded or not. I hope that someday I will be able to look back on these days and see how God has carried me through, or at least looked upon me with compassion. But I continue to be too mad and too numb to perceive it now.

I did have a breakthrough of sorts in November. The particulars of my life changed in 2003. In June, I resigned from my congregation in Terre Haute, Indiana, to become the publisher and editor of *DisciplesWorld*, a general circulation magazine for the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). My family is in the process of moving to Indianapolis. It has not been an easy transition. Just as pastors can become lightning rods for the fears and hopes of their parishioners, editors of church-wide magazines can become lightning rods for the fears and hopes of a denomination, especially one on the brink of transformation. I know that I need God to do this job well. I know that I need to rely on God, trust God, listen to God, and rest in God if I am going to negotiate this new calling.

That's the breakthrough. Earlier in the year, I wasn't sure I needed God. I thought perhaps I could live better on my own without God. But in November, the one-year anniversary of Micah's death and the six-year anniversary of Zechariah's death, I acknowledged that, yes, I need God. I'm not happy about it. I don't particularly want to need God. I don't particularly desire God in my life right now. But at least I can finally acknowledge again that I need God.

This is where I am today. Perhaps less personal testimony and more on birth defects and pregnancy loss, how common this loss is, or how difficult it is for women to speak about losing pregnancies would've been more helpful to the readers of this journal. However, I hope that by sharing something about my crisis I might help pastors think anew about how they care for parents who have lost pregnancies and children.

I would say the most important thing a congregation and a pastor can do for such a family is to surround them gently with the prayers, faith, and hope that the family may not be able to feel or express themselves. Choose faith for the ones who suffer such

doubt and fear. Be the tether that allows them to hold on while they are tossed about by the ugly and painful grief. Take the grief seriously. If you've never been pregnant, you may not think losing a baby at seventeen weeks gestation is such a life-altering experience, but it is. Be a pastor to the family experiencing loss; be a pastor to the women whose children die. I haven't had a pastor this past year. I've needed one. Instead, my family has cared for me.

Every Thanksgiving my family gathers at my parents' home in Oklahoma. During our Thanksgiving meal, each of us names that for which we have been thankful in the past year. I usually have something nice to say. I even had something nice to say last year when we gathered only a week after Micah died. But a year later, I did not. All I could be thankful for this year was that in the community of faith there are others who can give thanks to God for me when I cannot. They can "choose faith" for me. They can hold me in prayer and hope while I'm tossed about by grief and doubt. I can be thankful for that. And perhaps one day, I will again feel in my heart the blessing that is God's abundant love outlasting the pain and sorrow, the doubt and anger, and even the fear.