

## *The Protagonist Corner*

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This is the Pentecost issue of *Journal for Preachers*, which means it will arrive before the High Holy Day in early May, Mother's Day, known to women struggling with infertility as the terrible-horrible-move-to-Australia-kind-of-day. We don't have a color for it on the liturgical calendar, but in the congregation I serve, it should be cast in pastels to match the carnations that are passed out to mothers as they walk into the sanctuary. I have not spent a Mother's Day Sunday in worship where the sacrament of Baptism was missing. Where I serve, baptism on Mother's Day is a given. A number of years ago, I remember walking down the center aisle, holding an infant, one of the newly baptized, in my arms. My colleague and I were introducing the children to the congregation. He was inviting the children to look out and see their brothers and sisters, the people who had just promised to nurture them, love them, and teach them the stories of Jesus. I was following behind, holding a little tyke facing out. All the faces in the pews were smiling, craning their necks to get a good view. All except Martha. I'll always remember her sitting on the aisle, staring down, picking at the skin around her thumbnail. I knew her from young adult activities at church. The parade of children and parents and pastors came to a pause in that center aisle, and I was standing next to her. She didn't raise her eyes. It wasn't that she was distracted. She refused to look.

Now I know why. It was just too painful to see: the tiny feet dangling there, the mothers beaming, the baptismal gowns passed down from grandmothers, the wonder of life cradled in a pastor's arms, newly blessed. She couldn't do it. If she did, she would have to explain her tears. Or worse, the sight would illicit the anger, the jealousy, even the hate, and all *that* would make her feel guilty, right there in church.

It's not just young adults who struggle with this kind of unspoken pain. A few months back, I was sitting in a sunroom with Hal and Molly, who on their fifty-eighth wedding anniversary learned that Hal had bladder cancer. We three were sitting in the stun of it all, talking about surgery schedule and chemo and when their only son was going to arrive. Molly went into the kitchen to pour more tea, and the moment she left us alone, Hal said, "You know we had two children. Our infant daughter died in the hospital. She was three days old. She didn't get to come home or meet her brother. We tried to get pregnant again, but we just couldn't. Molly never talks about it." Molly came back with the tea, and I could see in Hal's face that I wasn't supposed to know what he had just blurted out and that our ninety-second conversation was over.

The heartache associated with infertility and pregnancy loss is severe, and so very often it is hidden. It's also widespread: one in eight couples face this life crisis. Research studies show that infertility is experienced as a traumatic life event, and that the stress and depression levels are basically indistinguishable from patients with cancer and heart disease. A parishioner may tell you about her radiation schedule, but she is not likely to tell you about her desperate disappointment when her cycle starts month after month. A parishioner may tell you how her mother is handling a

broken ankle, but will likely not confess her mother's broken heart over not joining the ranks of grandmotherhood. A parishioner may tell you about the nightmare of negotiating a business contract, but not the financial black hole he's in trying to pay for the adoption lawyer. It is not easy to tell your pastor that it freaks you out to keep a sharps container in your bathroom or that you're embarrassed that you can't keep your eyes open during a baptism.

Perhaps someone has welcomed you into the often isolated world of infertility pain. I hope so. Having a trusted friend along the journey can be life giving. In those conversations, you've likely learned not to say things like "Just Relax," "Don't stress," or "Once you stop trying, it will surely happen." Couples who are facing infertility, which is defined as unsuccessful trying for a full year, are not infertile because they are stressed. And to tell them to not think about it is insensitive and frankly impossible. Be aware also that if you bring up adoption, which is a beautiful way to become a parent, you might not be giving the couple space to grieve the loss of the experience of pregnancy and a biological child. In your conversations, care like you do with anyone who is grieving, with hefty amounts of listening, tenderness, and hope—not hope that you force down their throats, but hope that you hold quietly for them. You hold that hope for them even when they can't hold it for themselves. Hope is a risky thing, you know.

Hope is especially hard to hold during Advent, which I know is ironic, as Advent is generally a season of hope. This could be attributed to the songs recounting the infant so tender and mild, the virgin's tender arms enfolding the babe, the son of Mary. Singing already cracks the heart open, but when the lyrics are painted with the images of what you lack, the crack hurts. Advent is also so much about waiting. Infertile couples are practiced at waiting. Advent can frame their waiting theologically, but it can also exacerbate it. A helpful devotional Advent resource, specially written for couples who have experienced loss, is called *Holding Hope: Grieving Pregnancy Loss During Advent*, written by Ashley-Anne Masters. Most helpful, I think, is some word, some clue, some indication during worship that we preachers are not oblivious. Let us be subtle but not silent. Please not silent.

I say subtle because there is no way to cover every heartache, every circumstance that breaks the hearts of God's people every week in worship. We aren't called to present liturgical laundry lists of issues in our sermons and prayers. We've all heard the pastoral prayers that function as the kitchen sink. No, I'm advocating for a simple word in a prayer, an acknowledgement in a sermon that sometimes during Advent and Christmas not all is calm, not all is bright. And my hunch is that when that opening is made, when that space is created, the hope of the season and ultimately the hope of the Gospel will be able to be heard in a new way. And if nothing else, those couples will know that should they want to take their pain out of hiding, it would be safe camping in your heart.

This Mother's Day, walk those infants proudly down the aisle, introduce them to their family of faith, knowing that in that family there are some pretty amazing people, people who can teach them one day what it means to love before there was life to love, people who can teach them about strength and resilience and persistence, people who can teach them that—even if they have to close their eyes sometimes or keep their voices quiet during a hymn or two—the church is still a place to come and hear a word of life.