And a Sword will Pierce Your Own Soul

The Spirituality of Perinatal Loss

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Introduction
The purpose of this article is to propose a spirituality of perinatal loss. While there are several quality resources available that address the grief issues associated with miscarriage, stillbirth and neonatal death, we recognize that little is offered from a spiritual perspective. A foundational spirituality of pregnancy loss needs to be firmly rooted in two areas of concern: first, a grounding in the experience of losing a baby, and second, the opportunities for theological reflection that this experience provides. What questions does this raise about God and the mystery of human suffering? How might we, as God’s people, respond to the opportunities for theological first, a grounding in the experience of losing a baby, and second, the opportunities for theological reflection that this experience provides. What questions does this raise about God and the mystery of human suffering? How might we, as God’s people, respond to our sisters and brothers who grieve the sudden loss of their baby?

Confronting the Unimaginable
The story of Jesus’ presentation in the Temple brings these two concerns into focus. It hints at the imagined parental response, while offering a theological perspective. In Luke 2 we read:

“And the child’s father and mother were amazed at what was being said about (Jesus). Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary ‘This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed - and a sword will pierce your own soul too?’

The story is one of contrasts—the cruel irony of beginnings and endings. The newborn is blessed and destined for great things. But Simeon continues, foreshadowing with the cold image of the sword, the pain Mary will one day suffer.

Simeon’s words echo another truth: that as this child is born into the world, so shall he be exposed to all that might threaten his safety. And if only fleetingly, a sense of this child’s mortality. A reality understood as part of being human, but in the midst of this joyous moment, an unwelcome truth.

With Simeon’s words we confront the unimaginable, our own vulnerability as parents, the fact that one day our child will die. And like Mary, we too experience the sword cutting deep in our soul when our baby dies.

Significance of Perinatal Loss
The sword pierces the soul precisely because we are parents. We have implicitly said yes to participating more fully in bringing life into the world as parents. But we quickly realize we have said yes not just to becoming parents, but to becoming vulnerable.

Despite the assurance that there is absolutely nothing we as parents could have done to prevent the miscarriage or stillbirth, we may still wonder “What should we have done differently?” There is an even more insidious pain with pregnancy loss, however. It is the silence that seems to surround it. As a culture we are still learning how to cope with miscarriage and stillbirth. In an attempt to be supportive we instead betray our own anxiety. The conspiracy of silence is not about a lack of concern for those parents grieving their babies but the inadequacy we feel in conveying this concern.

Lamentation
The conspiracy of silence keeps us from touching the sorrow. As caregivers, we seem bereft of skills, but perhaps we can help parents feel they are being heard. One way is to consider the patient’s words and pain as a lament. The word lament conjures images of loud, prolonged, heartrending cries. But a lament can also be heard in the plaintive, wistful statement, “I wonder why this happened to me?” or “Why is God doing this to me?”

A model for the lament is found in the Bible. Of the 150 psalms, over a third are laments, acknowledging there is something very valid and universal in the experience of crying out in pain. In Scripture, it is Yahweh who journeys with us in our pain. In the same way that God is present to those groaning in anguish, so journeying with someone who has experienced a perinatal loss often means just being present to hear the words of the sufferer.

In the Scriptures, the psalmists cry out in their pain and usually find solace by the end of the psalm. It is not an answer... but a quiet consolation for a time. Repeatedly these prayers mirror the ultimate questions facing parents suffering a miscarriage or a stillbirth. “How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?”

“For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother’s womb.” Psalm 139
**The Spirituality of Perinatal Loss**

Other laments can be expressed when a person feels forgotten. “I am like those who have no help... like those whom you remember no more...” Here the psalmist is filled with pain, and although believes God has willed it, the writer keeps crying out to God! One who creates such a space for lament is truly present to the wounded, as God is for the psalmists.

Laments do not demand an answer. Knowing this permits us as caregivers to just sit in the painful moment and allow the pain to be there—held out in front of us. To sit with the parent offers a sense of presence, as Yahweh does for the psalmists. It is Emmanuel who sits and listens... God with us. As ministers of healing, we are called to do the same.

**Creating Memories**

How can we journey with the parents in a way that will offer meaning to this tragic event? First, we can honour their journey by remembering to say hello before we say goodbye. One way of doing so is to invite them to name their baby. If prayer is appropriate, speaking the infant’s name allows parents to hear their baby brought into the embrace of God. Viewing or holding the baby may represent the parent’s first steps on their healing journey. Other rituals might be baptism, if the infant was alive for a while at birth, or a prayer of commendation.

Another way to create memories is to offer keepsakes and remembrances. Our basic keepsake package includes an empathy card, a miscarriage booklet, a small two-sided journal entitled “When I Was Being Made in Secret” and a Remembrance of Life certificate. A brochure announcing our memorial and committal service is also included. In the case of a stillbirth or neo-natal death, there are more mementos available such as footprints and handprints, blankets, and photos. Finally, we include a prayer of blessing taken from Psalm 139.

In a parish, where it might not be feasible to gather the tiny remains, holding a memorial service would undoubtedly prove to be healing. The simple public acknowledgement of the loss can alert the community to care in newer and deeper ways.

**The Sword’s Reach**

The Committal service also provides an opportunity for staff in our hospital to participate in the mourning process and recognize their own helplessness and vulnerability. Furthermore, it allows them to see parents moving forward in their healing journey, and to affirm this with them, especially when these parents may have been under our care in hospital for only a few hours.

Given the intensity and fury at which pregnancy loss unfolds it is no wonder that parents are left in shock—yet the grieving is just beginning. It is vital therefore that community clergy be sensitive to the needs of their parishioners...
who have experienced miscarriage and stillbirth, for the impact of grief will not manifest itself in the hospital. Healing, when it comes, will be in community. In expressing our pain and mourning together, we release the pain to the One who holds all our pain—the One who hears our communal lament and transforms our experience with hope.

Simeon's Blessing/Burden
Simeon's prophecy reminds Mary of her vulnerability. But the burden of this prophetic word only makes sense in the context of the overall blessing. "This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many..." It is always a lived tension: blessing and burden, joy and sorrow, life and death.

Simeon assures Mary that this child will reveal the inner thoughts of many. And nowhere are we confronted more with our own inner thoughts and feelings than when our child dies. We ask why. We question our faith. Our powerlessness in the face of sudden pregnancy loss shatters the cultural illusion of "mastering and subduing" creation. Reluctantly, we acknowledge the fact that we are not as powerful as nature, reproducing on demand. God does not owe us children.

Recognizing it is not we who are the authors of life, but God, allows us to accept our powerlessness, our role as stewards and ultimately, the mystery of life and of God's ways. In faith we allow God to hold our pain, and in doing so, to hold us.

The Bittersweet Memory
Sharing rituals, keepsakes and blessings, and mourning together communicates hope. Hope means that all is not lost. It does not deny the tragedy, but it enables us to join in the assurance offered in Psalm 139.

My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret.
Your eyes beheld my unformed substance...
How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them!
If I try to count them—they are more than the sand;
I come to the end—I am still with you.

The baby is with God, and this gives us hope, but the caregiver too embraces the hope found in these words. For God is also with us as we accompany those whose souls have been pierced through.

References
See for example, Resolve Through Sharing (RITS) Bereavement Services, 1910 South Avenue, La Crosse, WI 54601, or the Centering Corporation, 1531 N, Saddle Creek Road, Omaha, NE 68104 for listing of resources and program information.

2 Luke 2, 33-35
3 Psalm 13: 1
4 Psalm 88: 4,5


Suggested Readings