

Marjory Zoet Bankson: Realities from the Circle

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A Sermon for Seekers Church

By Marjory Zoet Bankson

Realities from the Circle

Text: [Luke 2:25-42](#)

A couple of weeks ago, I had a dream of being up here naked, putting on a fuzzy green bathrobe with my arms stretched out so the robe fell open and I had nothing on. There was a younger woman yelling at me, accusing me of trying to entice her husband with my nakedness. Looking down at my aging body, I was amused but knew it was true, felt strong enough to withstand her anger and willing to take the consequences, even if it meant being asked to leave because I was abusing her hospitality.

So, that was the dream. Then Carolyn gave me a Christmas present – a lovely picture frame with a photograph from my birthday ritual with women from this community on the overnight. I remembered the joy of that day and the “naked” feelings I had about joining the circle of five crones—Sonya, Muriel, Liz, Jane Lieper and Kathy Cochrane – each of whom offered some reflections on what their 60s had meant. In different ways, each one said the sixth decade involved three things: **loss of work identity, some physical diminishment** and **discovering a deeper source of hope**. On the way back up to the lodge, Tiffany remarked, “I thought life was supposed to get easier, but that’s not what I heard.” I just nodded, wondering

if I would be up to the challenge my 60s would present.

Now we stand on the cusp of a new millennium, with a move in front of us and a month to develop skills for community discernment of our next step. It seems to me that the central issue we are struggling with is not whether to move to Carroll Street in Takoma DC, but how to deal with the generational shift in leadership for Seekers. The Gospel lesson provides a rich tableau to explore some of the issues that I see. You will no doubt see others as we reflect on the Gospel story. I will use the three "realities" from the Circle of Crones as the basis for my sharing today. Moreover, I will be as naked as I can be without abusing your hospitality.

Let us start with the last one first.

1. Discovering a Deeper Hope

On this last Sunday of the Millennium, the Gospel lesson provides an amazing archetypal scene for us. Two elders, Anna and Simeon, appear at the Temple just as Mary and Joseph bring the baby Jesus to be dedicated. Simeon, a man living in deep contact with Spirit, arrives from somewhere in the city, takes the child in his arms and says he can now die fulfilled because he has seen the One who will reach out to the Gentiles. Then Anna, prophet and crone, who lives at the Temple, joyfully predicts the child's transforming power for Jerusalem as well. Old age and imminent death apparently create the detachment needed to see the babe with God's perspective.

They offered hope for a different future.

One of the ways I like to work with scripture is to hold an image in my mind and breathe into it, letting other associations emerge. That Luke included a man and a woman here tells us something about his image of God, “male and female” as Genesis puts it. Simeon speaks directly to Mary, thereby stretching tradition and Anna is associated with the Temple, a clear reversal of roles that traditionally would have made that the prerogative of male priests. Instead of the Temple hierarchy, we have two lay people, a man and a woman, offering God’s word to Mary, Joseph and the others gathered round. Luke seems to be telling us that God’s way breaks through the usual patterns of power – insight comes from people who will not live to see it happen.

I have a sense that there are people who already know what God is calling us to—even if it means the community will continue without everyone who is presently here. Anna and Simeon were ready to offer their prophetic words and then bow out of the picture. They spoke truth without being tied to it. I am coming to believe that one of the gifts of age can be that kind of vision.

A friend of mine, Rosaly Roffman, gave me permission to include this poem which catches the flavor of hope which I sense from Anna and Simeon:

*Turning into and over
these thousands of years
our breath may be
the what of this universe*

the where of trees

the when of stones

the why of oceans

Then let there be no corner

without our stopping the day for

praise-poeming

prayer-shawling

and gratitude dancing

for the holy, the bittersweet

and elegant ongoingness

Yes

of it all

Where are the voices of Anna and Simeon in our midst, helping us say “Yes” to the holy and bittersweet, the elegant ongoingness of it all?

2. Loss of Work Identity

Mary and Joseph, the parents who bring the child to the temple, provide another image—one that I have identified with here in Seekers. They are doing their duty. They came to fulfill the Law and they were not expecting anything special. The text says they “were amazed” and probably worried as well when they heard Simeon’s blessing. When they were finished, they returned to their hometown in Galilee, where the child

grew “strong in body and wise in spirit.”

When I spent some time with the image of Mary and Joseph, what came was the need for **unglamorous responsible family-type formation structures** that will protect and nourish the newness that God is bringing into the world. When I think of Seekers, the “unglamorous and responsible structures” seem to be

- our commitment to living out of call,
- personal disciplines,
- regular financial giving,
- mission group life,
- Stewardship for some and
- showing up for community events like worship, potlucks at Christmas and Easter, retreats and sing-alongs. Nurturing structures will change with need just as families do, but they must be in place to shelter new births so they can grow “strong in body and wise in spirit.”

As I have followed that thread to where there is a knot with regard to our move, I found a connection between work and call and aging. Some of you know that when I left seminary in 1985 to take the job directing Faith@Work, I drove to Columbia MD from Alexandria every day for seven years– a round trip of slightly more than 100 miles, half of it on the beltway. As the traffic got worse and I got older, the drive got harder and harder until I finally said to the Board of Faith@Work, “move the office or find a new president.” As a result, we moved the office to Falls Church and I was able to stay, anchoring my work in the world close to home and to the airport.

For me, worship in this brownstone building was part of anchoring me for mission in other places. 2025 has stood for solidity, stability, permanence and credibility as I worked with people of difference churches and denominations in search authentic spiritual community— my Mary-and-Joseph identity. Moving will mean letting go of the internal structure that has held my work identity for some 25 years.

Peter and I came 25 years ago, when this community was just forming. At age 35, we were just beginning to ask deeper questions of call and gifts and mission. We tried some things that did not work. I remember passing out sharing questions at the breakfast we used to have before worship because I thought we needed help “going deeper” in our sharing. In addition, I got involved in Learners & Teachers because I was critical of the lecture method that was standard in classes then. Then, for the past 15 years, Seekers has been my place of family while I offered my call to others through Faith@Work. Now Peter and I stand at the other end of the work-identity period, asking ourselves what it would mean to let go of our Mary-and-Joseph identity and discover something deeper, at once more alive and more vulnerable, like Anna and Simeon.

This week, I got a call from Ken Leinbach, ordering some books from Faith@Work. He told me how happy he and Shauna are in Milwaukee “except,” he said, “we haven’t found a spiritual community like Seekers.” He told me how they had looked around, visited different churches, looking for structures that somebody else created and maintained. I remember feeling like Mary and Joseph for the Leinbachs and many other younger people as they came, struggled with spiritual issues and, in some cases, left. Then Ken continued... “So I decided to do something myself. I have started asking a local religious leader to come to the ecology center, select a “sacred space”

and provide a meditation for whoever comes. We stay in silence for a while, as we did at Seekers, and then share out of the experience together. I'm calling it "spiritual ecology" and it's beginning to catch on."

As people like Ken Leinbach begin to pick up the Mary and Joseph tasks of maintaining the structures of this community and others like it, I can better release my work identity for something else too. As we face the generational turnover here in Seekers, I realize that I will need to replace my resistance to the physical move with those deeper questions and listen for God's guidance instead of to my own fears about driving "halfway to Columbia" again.

I am reminded of a passage from Annie Dillard's little book, *Holy the Firm*:

Who shall ascend into the hill of the Lord? Or who shall stand in his holy place? There is no one but us. There is no one to send, nor a clean hand, nor a pure heart on the face of the earth, nor in the earth, but only us, a generation comforting ourselves with the notion that we have come at an awkward time, that our innocent fathers are all dead—as if innocence had never been—and our children busy and troubled, and we ourselves unfit, not yet ready, having each of us chosen wrongly, made a false start, failed, yielded to impulse and the tangled comfort of pleasures, and grown exhausted, unable to seek the thread, weak, and involved. But there is no one but us. There never has been. (Pp 56-57)

Mary and Joseph remind me that dutiful commitment has its

place in the process of revelation but that discernment also means shifting from one call or mission to another.

3. Physical Diminishment

The hardest thing to hear as I stood in the Circle of Crones on that sunny October day was that I could expect some measure of physical diminishment during this decade. That is the last thing any of us want to hear. Yet, the subject of our Gospel lesson is the ultimate example of dependence—a newborn child—vulnerable, naked and freshly exposed by circumcision. We may easily assume that we love children because of their potential, their not-yet-spoiled qualities of innocence, but I want to suggest that **their vulnerability** calls forth something from us that we hardly acknowledge in our busy, self-sufficient lives.

Vulnerability happens on the other end of the age spectrum too. I think all of us have been blessed by Manning's fragility and his willingness to keep us posted on his well-being and not-so-well-being with Parkinson's disease. We live in a culture that hides fragility and vulnerability. Nevertheless, we live in a community that has the potential for caring, the possibility of learning from weakness and vulnerability. Physical diminishment can be a gift in community, even if none of us wants to hold it while others move in quick, sure-footed ways.

Many of us were touched by watching or reading *Tuesdays With Morrie*. In spite of the critic's carping, I found it a message of hope and transformation for both men. Morrie was blessed by the regular visits from Mitch and the younger man had a chance to learn how to let his heart open wider when our culture was dedicated to keeping it closed—because he made a better

corporate robot that way.

Vulnerability, our own and others, can open our hearts to God! To love! To our dependence on one another. Physical diminishment has its work and witness in community. Alone, it is just depressing. Together, it can open our hearts in ways that skills and success never will.

As we stand on the brink of a new Millennium, Seekers have a chance to be different from the culture around us. Our discernment process will certainly include a specific decision about whether to put money down on the property at Carroll Street in Takoma DC, but I think the bigger question is whether we can live into the generational shift that is going on in our midst.

It is our nakedness and vulnerability, when held with reverence and blessing by others that will open our hearts to God. If we will take time to breathe into the images of scripture and let them grow down into the stream of Spirit that connects us, I believe that we will know the way we are to go and who will be leading us in the next round of being Seekers together.

*May God let our hearts open "for the holy, the bittersweet
and elegant ongoingness*

Yes

of it all."

Amen.