

Endless advent? Childless in December: Childless inDecember

by [Mary T. Stimming](#) in the [December 6, 2000](#) issue

Here we are in the midst of December—surrounded by Santa, elves and frenzied children. Due to the intense focus on children at this time of year, the season is often a very painful one for people who are experiencing infertility or who have suffered a miscarriage. I recall that when my husband I were struggling to start a family, I once threatened to create a bonfire if I received one more “here are my perfect children” photo.

For Christians, this is not the holiday season—it’s Advent. And the time of Advent may hold special meaning for those experiencing reproductive loss. Liturgically and theologically, Advent is a time of waiting. For people experiencing reproductive loss, life can feel like an endless Advent—waiting for the next test result, waiting for the next cycle, waiting for the next attempt, waiting for the pregnancy results, waiting to pass milestones in a precarious pregnancy, waiting to know what the future holds. Truly, “hopes and fears” press upon us during the Advents of our lives. We long for the waiting to be over.

What will end this wait? Well, it’s obvious, isn’t it: a child. This kind of thinking is reinforced by the Christmas end of Advent—here you go, a baby. And a really great baby at that!

Certainly some communities adopt this way of understanding Advent. A few years ago, my husband and I were dismayed to read in our parish bulletin that a special blessing would be offered to pregnant women at all masses on the third Sunday of Advent. We didn’t object to the offer of a special blessing, but why only for pregnant women? Why not for all expectant mothers—including those waiting to adopt?

Above all, we objected to the implied message of this liturgical innovation: that Christmas is about a baby. It is not. It is about “Emmanuel,” “God with us.” And infertile and grieving parents-to-have-been need to hear this gospel, this good news. We need to know that God is present with us in our suffering—that God is “Emmanuel,” “God with us,” not against us, while we endure our personal Advent.

Ultimately, Advent is fulfilled not by a child but through the healing of brokenness and the restoration of hope—and these gifts are available regardless of whether we become parents or not.

Of course, there are obstacles to our reception of such a gift. For me, there was the ever-pleasant trio of envy of others, a sense of failure about myself, and fear about the future. Through conversations with others that have experienced infertility or miscarriage, I know I am not alone. Hence, it is with qualified shame that I share my experience.

“Why do they have what I want?!” Oakbrook Mall, home of middle-class consumerism, was the site of my seething anger, envy and resentment. Envy not of the trendy clothes or the clever housewares, but of the pregnant women and the mothers pushing strollers. I recall feeling anger at pregnant women “flaunting” their pregnancies, envy of their shopping expeditions for maternity clothes and nursery items, and indignation at those pregnant women who seemed less “deserving” of pregnancy than I.

“Is there more to me than my fertility status?” When I was most depressed about infertility, I experienced a pervasive sense of personal failure. The repeated negative pregnancy tests deepened my conviction that I was a failure—incapable of “doing” the most basic, primitive act. (If you watch a nature show on TV in this frame of mind, you feel like an evolutionary outcast!) This conviction spilled over into all areas of life. What did it matter that I was respected as a teacher, loved as a wife, valued as a friend—I can’t have a baby and that’s all that matters . . . right?

“The present holds pain. I fear what the future might bring.” The game plan called for three children, two years apart, by the time I turned 32. But when I turned 32 my husband and I were no closer to parenthood than when we’d started trying. We felt out of control in ways small and large: Do we buy the compact or the station wagon? Do I take the job out-of-state or stay put? Will we ever be parents? If so, when? If not, what then?

Having no control over such a major area of one’s life further fuels one’s envy and self-castigation: “Why can’t I ‘do’ this as expected?” One enters a vicious cycle of biological, psychological and spiritual distress.

How might faith illuminate these intense and painful experiences? It doesn’t make the difficult situation evaporate; it doesn’t promise that all will go how we want. It

does enable us to see our troubles within a larger context and prompt us to search for a redemptive meaning. Faith does not remove the marks of suffering, but it can transform their meaning. It is sobering and valuable to remember that resurrection does not erase the wounds of crucifixion.

“It rains on the just and the unjust.” One of the roots of our envy is, I suspect, a sense that our situation is unjust. We reason that if we are virtuous, surely God should bless us with pregnancy. With fear and shame, we wonder if being infertile means God has cursed us. Don’t scriptural accounts of God’s “opening and closing” the womb as “reward and punishment” for fidelity to the covenant tell us as much?

But the Bible’s views of reproduction reflect the understanding and culture of its day, not our own. Scripture attributes much directly to God that we today would attribute to other forces. Moreover, these passages are, for the most part, concerned not with fertility per se but with the implementation of God’s salvific will broadly understood. (The biblical tradition at least acknowledges the pain infertility causes; there are no texts that say, “Just relax” or “It’s not that big a deal.”)

If we can begin to see infertility as due not directly to the will of God, but to a complex web of forces forged in a divine matrix, then we can begin to appreciate that, as Jesus put it, “it rains on the just and the unjust.” Our general experience confirms that suffering is not distributed throughout the world in proportion to virtue or vice. While experiencing infertility or miscarriage, we are apt to focus on the stories of Sarah and Rachel and their long-awaited pregnancies. We should read these, however, alongside the stories of Job and the man born blind (John 9) in order to remind ourselves that the theory of divine retribution does not stand uncontested in either the Old or the New Testament. And if this fails to qualify the miracle-baby stories, at least we can relish the passages featuring laments and “fist shaking” at God.

If we see that God is not granting pregnancy to others and withholding it from us, some of our envy will abate. Envy is tricky theologically—it’s understandable, but it corrupts us. Thomas Aquinas considered whether envy is “a form of sorrow,” and he concluded that this is indeed the case with some types of envy. And I think this is an accurate insight into most of our situations. Our envy of others is, at least in large measure, an expression of our grief over our own barrenness. However, Thomas does deem one form of envy sinful: the type that encourages us to love and appreciate only the good that we personally possess. If God is the author of all life,

then eventually our appreciation of life must override our sorrow at our inability to share in one particular way of perpetuating life.

“I am a child of God—that alone is sufficient.” Infertility has a nasty way of consuming one’s life—time, money, body, emotions. No wonder my experience of disappointments in this realm spilled into everything—my professional life, my marriage, my friendships. That I experienced my infertility as a “personal failure”—as some sort of inability to achieve what I willed—is the product of both our culture at large, which naïvely believes “if you dream it you can be it,” and the more circumscribed culture of the reproductive technology clinics, which speak in terms of “failed cycles” and “quitting treatment.” This language reflects the tendency of infertility patients to consider our medical problems as subject to human desires, human will. It is humbling to realize that we are not masters of our own fate.

It is liberating to realize that we are not defined solely by our fertility or lack thereof. Christianity teaches that humanity is made in the image of God, that we are children of God. To accept for oneself the dignity this bestows is to be freed of the fear that we are defined by our infertility.

“My pain shall be transformed. Joy will return.” Most of our society assumes that conception and pregnancy are a matter of choice, under personal control. Infertility rudely reminds us that vast realms of our lives, reproduction and beyond, lie outside our control. We have not lost control of our lives—we have been abruptly shocked out of the comfortable illusion that we were ever in control. Once our innocence on this matter is shattered, there is no going back. The insight into reality that this provides comes at a high price, and in many ways it sets us apart from those who cling to the mirage of the limitlessness of human power.

Faith helps us to accept the often painful limits of our lives. It confirms our sense that not all is under our will and that we are not the center of reality. Further, faith empowers us to hope that new life can emerge from death. For infertile people, this is strong language. Many of us experience our infertility as a form of death; perhaps we have literally carried death within our bodies. Faith assures us this is not the final word. It proclaims our call to the fullness of life. An inability to bring forth new human life does not disqualify us from our rightful share in life’s banquet. The promise of life transformed belongs to us whether we reproduce or not.

Martin Luther wrote a treatise on the hiddenness of God's revelation at Christmas. He comments on how God's revelation in Christ comes in a manner and form the world did not expect. The personal ad we would script for a Savior would seek someone powerful and wealthy, with lots of important friends. Instead, Jesus comes to us weak, poor and persecuted. God is hidden in the moment of revelation. The challenge to those experiencing reproductive loss during the Christmas season, or any other season, is to become aware of the presence of God hidden in our midst. Blood, disappointment and death are not how we would describe our ideal meeting place with God. But it is in those realities that God may be waiting. Our Advent is not endless. In our waiting, God is waiting to be present to us.

*This article is based on a talk by the author to the infertility support group at St. Patrick's Catholic Church in Chicago.*