

2020 12 20 – Eternal Love

Luke 1:26-45 (The Inclusive Bible)

This Advent season I've been using stories from the December 2020 issue of the Broadview magazine. Today, I'm going to begin my reflection with the opening words of a story by Jenna Tenn-Yuk called *Popo's Table*. She begins:

“Angel — no nose, no eyes?” Popo asks with a smile. My grandmother, the matriarch of the family, examines a handmade faceless angel ornament, squeezing and touching the halo with her crooked fingers. She lifts it by its metal hook, giving it to me to put on the tree.

Her face lights up with surprise as she unpacks each ornament from the box by her feet, not remembering they are the same ornaments we have hung on the tree for years. After we finish decorating, I see Popo staring past the tree in contemplation. “Popo, what are you thinking about?” I ask.

“You know, Christmas is happy and sad,” she says. “Happy because you're with family, everyone's around. Sad because you remember what you lost.” She doesn't have to say his name. I know she's still grieving Gung Gung, my grandfather who died 30 years ago.

And now, several years after we decorated that tree, I'm grieving the gradual loss of her. It has been difficult to watch as Popo's health has

declined with broken hips and dementia. As I see her fade, I can already feel the immense hole that will be her absence.

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In this story, Jenna is talking about her grandmother, a woman that has obviously been a huge part of her life. Someone that has loved and cared for her. Someone that she loves in return.

I invite you to think of all the people in your life who have loved you. Those who loved you as you were growing up and those who have loved you as an adult. Some of us are no doubt thinking about our parents or grandparents. Others may be thinking of aunts, uncles, teachers or friends. We may be thinking of spouses, children, grandchildren, of nieces, nephews, of students or mentors. Our lives are built on loving relationships. Our very beings are formed by those who love us.

In today's scripture reading, we are introduced to Mary, a young woman who is engaged to a man named Joseph. Mary, no doubt, has people who love her in her life. We don't get a chance to meet them, but we can assume that she has loving parents, probably even siblings, extended family and friends. Her fiancée, Joseph, may love her too. But, in first century Galilee, it's just as likely that theirs is an arranged marriage and that Mary and Joseph hardly know each other at all.

According to the Gospel of Luke, Mary is visited by the angel Gabriel and told that she has been chosen to be the mother of the Holy One of God. Being told

that you are going to have a child is usually a positive experience. Most women long to be a mother, to have the opportunity to love and nurture a child of their own. But, as we know, Mary is not yet married. It will be difficult for Mary to explain her pregnancy to her parents and to Joseph. But Mary agrees anyway. She says, "I am the servant of God. Let it be done to me as you say."

And then, a few days later, Mary goes to the hill country, to the town of Judah, to visit her kinswoman, Elizabeth. Why does she go? Is it to get away from the prying eyes of her neighbours? To hide from Joseph or her parents? To find a safe place to wait and see if she really is pregnant? I think she goes because she knows that Elizabeth is also miraculously pregnant and will understand her situation. I believe she knows that Elizabeth is older and more experienced and will be able to give her wise counsel. I'm convinced Mary goes to the hill country because she knows love and acceptance is waiting for her there.

We all need places and people that we can go to when our lives aren't going the way we expected. We all need someone who will love us unconditionally, someone who will challenge us, comfort us, support us and even suffer with us. Mary found that person in her kinswoman, Elizabeth. Who is that person for you?

It is obvious that Popo, Jenna's grandmother, has been a key figure in her life. In the story Jenna talks about all the traditional food Popo prepared for their Christmas celebrations. She remembers helping her grandmother make her

famous rum cakes. Cakes that would then be gifted to family and friends. Jenna shares all these wonderful memories and then concludes her story saying,

I can't remember the last Christmas she cooked for us. But the way she still kneads dough and pinches the top of dai bao (steamed buns) is an art. The muscle memory in her hands remains, even with no recollection of the recipe.

Popo spent her whole life taking care of the family. How strangely the roles have shifted 30 years later. These days, I feed her, brush her hair and tuck her into bed, just like she did for me when I was little.

I try to imagine a Christmas without her, and it doesn't seem possible. My heart aches at the thought, knowing the immense loss coming for me and my family. But I have lost her many times already — with each little death that comes with dementia. She isn't the same Popo who baked rum cake with me or filled the table with extravagant Christmas dinners.

Several Christmases ago, Popo told me she was ready to see Gung Gung and how she still cries for him every day. "But Popo, I'm going to miss you and cry for you every day," I told her.

"I'll always be with you, Jenna," she replied.

I hold on to those words just as I hold on to all the Christmases we have spent together and each precious moment I have with her now — whether or not she knows who I am. She may not make it to Christmas this year, but we will always be connected, our lives kneaded and folded together by her beautiful hands.

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Jenna knows that her grandmother will be with her always. She knows that love, true love, is eternal. The people that we love remain with us even when they are physically gone. Whether our relationships have ended because of death, illness, hurt, apathy, distance or just time, the love that was shared, will leave an indelible mark on our hearts and on our lives.

This year, as many of us spend our Christmas holidays distant from our loved ones, may we remember that love transcends both time and space. As we wait to celebrate the birth of Mary's son, may we open our hearts and feel the love that is waiting for us there. Love that is sacred. Love that is eternal. Love that is both ancient and new.