

FWith Thanksgiving for the Life of  
Mary Martha (Johnson) Frey  
23 July 1927 + 25 November 2019  
Matthew 1:18-25; John 1:14, 18

The Word becoming flesh. Emmanuel: God with us. In brief reflection, I'd like to hold onto those promises as embodied in Mary's life and for us now as we face her death, with God at the center.

This is a wonderful time to celebrate Mary's wonderful life. This season is a time when we think especially about God's presence with us, about how God was born to be among us and know our lives, beginning with a birth in Bethlehem, through our joys and our sufferings, facing even death to bring us to life abundant. In this season leading up toward Christmas, we celebrate this presence of God with us as the Incarnation, as God in our flesh.

To look first at the reflected version of that, we know God as embodied in Mary, incarnated in Mary and reflected through her and her actions.

I'm told she identified deeply with her vocation, her calling, as a psychiatric social worker. In that, she got to be present for all kinds of moments of human life, from some very difficult settings with patients, and in helping in the process of healing.

She also got to know intimately what it is to share life, to abide with people. One of her clients became particularly close, and even after she retired from her career, Mary kept meeting with that woman and helping her and being together with her, never telling her that she wasn't just doing it because of a job or a paycheck anymore, but doing it to be together, to support, to share life. Even to the point when Mary died here, she had one of that woman's paintings hanging in her room, a painting that maybe she purchased to offer some small bit of support, but with which she came to identify.

That is incarnational. That is how God is in our flesh, abiding with us, knowing us, sharing life, not doing it just because we're fun or impressive or nice, certainly not an obligation, but being with us never to let us go.

Another part of the career of a psychiatric social worker was striking for me in this way. Susie and Martha talked about how their mother would be out at social events in her hometown of Winnetka, Illinois, and at those social events she'd be interacting with people she also knew through social work.

To me, it shows a beautiful vision of seeing the whole person, of being able to relate to them as normal and good and part of regular relationships, and not defined by the difficulties or faults or bad parts.

That is also incarnational; God comes to know our whole lives—the stuff we'd be proud of and prefer to have happening, while also not restricting a view of us or relationship with us by our shortcomings or struggles or sins or things that might separate us in the relationship.

The strength of identity and care was something that Mary embodied not just for work, but shared in service beyond that. When Martha and Susie's grandmother needed assistance and began to move to the end of life, Mary stepped in with dedication and devotion to have her move in and be present for the help needed, to meet the need.

But in somewhat the reverse version, still as a later form of care and concern, Mary was attentive to find a place here at Attic Angel for herself so that she didn't impose a burden demanding care from her own daughters. In that way she took care of herself so that she didn't need to make them do it.

That seems also reflective of our God, who is self-giving, offering in love, never striving to demand or set unrealistic expectations, serving rather than being served. What Mary embodied through her life, then, is reflective of the God of love we know embodied in Jesus, and her life helps us celebrate the God who comes to be with us, in a birth celebrated at Christmas with angel song, and for the whole of life.

And so that is extended in this moment. The promise of God with us, Emmanuel, who holds us close to God's own heart, who comes to love and

save and free us, this God who came to know our life also came so that we may know more of life.

It was not only for these days that Jesus was born. Not just to know birth and our labors. Not just to experience with us our delights and our tears. Not even only to walk with us until death closes our eyes and we breathe our last, and not only to be with us in comfort and consolation as we are left behind, as we grieve in the face of death and loss.

No, for this moment especially we look to Jesus, “born to save each child of earth, born to give us second birth,” who will breathe freshly into Mary’s lungs the Holy Spirit, raising her to new life, and gathering us with her, uniting us in love. God is with us, that we may be with God, and with Mary, forever.