

REFLECTIONS ON MOM: IN LIFE AND DEATH

Luke 2:36-38

*A sermon given by Larry R. Hayward, on Trinity Sunday, June 16, 2019,
at Westminster Presbyterian Church in Alexandria, Virginia.*

There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband for seven years after her marriage, then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshipped there with fasting and prayer night and day. At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.

I want to thank all of you for the support and outreach you have shown Maggie in me since the recent death of my mother. I am particularly grateful to Patrick and Whitney and Ben and all the staff who provided terrific worship services the past four weeks. I have listened to the sermons – and heard reviews of the music – and it is a great feeling for me to know listen to you worship well from a distance. I am grateful to all of you.

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In January 1983, Reverend William Sloane Coffin stood before the congregation of the Riverside Church in New York, which he had been serving for five years, and preached a sermon entitled “Alex’s Death.”¹ It was ten days after his 24-year-old son had been killed in an automobile accident on a stormy night in Boston. Coffin’s sermon has become a classic, read alike by *many* who would *seek to preach* and *many more* who would *seek to understand* the death of a child in the early and hopeful years of adulthood.

In response to a very different type of death, I want to preach today on the recent death of my own mother, Carolyn Hayward, twenty two days ago, in her eighty-seventh year. I do so aware that such a sermon is fraught with potential pitfalls, not the least of which is that it can become

- More about the preacher than the good news to which the preacher is called to bear witness
- More about the deceased than about the God the deceased has worshipped
- More about in this case a death gentle and beautiful that speaks little to those in the congregation whose losses – like Coffin’s – have been anything but gentle and beautiful.

“Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints,”² says the Psalmist; but not every death is precious in the sight of human beings.

Yet even with these pitfalls – and even though today is Father’s Day – I seek to walk through this sermon in the midst of you whom I love and whose love I have received since I first stood in this pulpit fifteen years ago.

Let us pray: *Lord, on this day particularly, may the words of my mouth and the meditations these words elicit within our hearts be acceptable in Thy sight and give Thee glory. In the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.*

¹ Available at https://www.pbs.org/now/printable/transcript_eulogy_print.html.

² Psalm 116:15 KJV.

The facts are these:

- On Monday, May 20th, Mom went to a doctor's appointment near her home in Germantown, Tennessee, for some nagging digestion issues. The appointment went without incident, but apparently walking back to her car Mom became nauseous. She was able to drive the few blocks home, but grew progressively worse. She crawled into bed and did something I have never known her to do: Call for help. When a friend arrived, he immediately called 911.
- I was at Camp Hallowood finishing up our annual staff retreat, when a call from the 901 area code came over my cell phone. Many of you know that reception at Hallowood is spotty, but the voice on the other end was loud and clear: "Mr. Hayward, this is Methodist/Le Bonheur Hospital in Germantown. We have your mother in the Emergency Room. Do you know if she has a 'Do Not Resuscitate' order?" I said: "She does. Is it possible for me to talk with her?" "No," they said. "We are working on her." I sent Maggie a text which ended "I am not sure I'm ready for this," and drove home.
- I flew out of Reagan at 5:00 a.m. the next morning, walked into Mom's room about 11:00 a.m., saw her on a ventilator, to which I was told she had agreed to it "as long as it was temporary." The nurse told me Mom was heavily sedated under "the Michael Jackson drug." The doctor said she had ingested food into her lungs, perhaps over time perhaps the previous afternoon, and was not likely to survive the pneumonia that had ensued. My brother Steve, his daughter Shelby, and my wife Maggie arrived the next morning. Two days later, we made the decision to remove the ventilator. Twenty-four hours later, she took her last breath.
- Maggie led the service of inurnment in the recently constructed Memorial Garden at Germantown Presbyterian Church, a garden in whose design and construction my mom was involved. The church's pastor led the service in the Sanctuary. I said a word of thanks to the congregation; and the next day we all departed.

From the time I arrived on Tuesday morning until Mom died on Saturday, there was always at least one family member with her. She was never alone.

I.

I want to reflect on her life in ways that I hope can speak to each of us as people of faith or people seeking faith. And I want to do so with reference to a quiet and rarely noticed character in Luke's narrative of the birth of Christ.

As you may recall, on the eighth day of their son's life, Mary and Joseph take their infant Jesus to the Temple in Jerusalem where he is received and blessed by an aging Simeon and Anna.³ Luke describes Anna as

...a prophet...the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher.

She was of a great age, having lived with her husband for seven years after her marriage, then as a widow to the age of eighty-four.

She never left the temple but worshipped there with fasting and prayer night and day.

³ Luke 2:22-38.

In addition, Luke says that “at the moment” Anna saw the Christ child, she “began to *praise* God and to speak about *the child* to all who were looking for the *redemption* of Jerusalem.”

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When we read Luke, it is difficult for us not to view the three women who appear – Elizabeth, Mary, and Anna – as soft, gentle, almost angelic creatures, floating through the narrative with haloes on their heads and harps in their hands.

My mother did *not* fit this image. Though quiet and reserved, Mom brooded a lot, was occasionally caustic, normally commented on the pound or two I had added since our previous visit, hung wallpaper for a living, played golf and tennis, and until a few years ago biked from the suburb in which we lived to the Mississippi River in downtown Memphis – some twenty miles one way. Though she was petite, she did not, like Anna, engage in religious fasting, and though I am confident she prayed, I never heard her pray aloud.

II.

One place I see a connection to Anna is in the sense of *community* Mom drew from the church, similar to Anna’s sense of community in the Temple. In both cases it was a community to which they turned out of a sense of loss.

My mother was born in 1931 in Jonesboro, Arkansas, to Lawrence Robert Reese and Madge Reese. She had an older brother named Lawrence Robert Reese, Jr., after whom I am named, though I am just plain “Larry.”

While Mom’s father was a respected citizen who owned a local Rexall Drug Store – at whose dark, mahogany counters I received fountain Cokes on hot summer afternoons – her father not only filled prescriptions for the *townspeople* who came to him, but also supplied *himself* and *his wife* with drugs which had not been *prescribed*. My mother thus grew up in a household in which the *outward* signs were of church and community leadership, but whose *inner* reality was marked by the *chaos of addiction*.

- My grandfather was in and out of treatment.
- He died at age 55.
- After his death, his widow, my grandmother, had DUIs, automobile accidents, arrests for shoplifting, incidents of locking herself in the bathroom, and at least one major stint in the state hospital.

Despite – or perhaps *because of* – growing up in such chaos and uncertainty, my mom became an honor student, a popular young woman who double dated at the famed Peabody Hotel in Memphis, a member of the National Honor Society, and the recipient of an academic scholarship to Rhodes College in Memphis.

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Though she never expressed this to me, my hunch is that part of what led her to see her way through the chaos of her childhood was the way she idolized her brother Larry, who was four years older.

- Like so many people of his generation, Larry dropped out of high school to enlist in the Navy to serve in World War II.

- He became a tail gunner in the Navy Air Corps, flying forty-three missions over Japan and China, receiving the Distinguished Flying Cross and re-enlisting after his war enlistment was over.

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On August 31, 1947, stationed at Millington Naval Air Base in Memphis, he received a weekend pass to fly in an airshow in his hometown of Jonesboro. Ten people drew raffle tickets to fly with him, one at a time, as he performed stunts and rolls in the air to the cheers of a thousand people on the ground below.

The ninth passenger – it is surmised – panicked in the plane, tried to wrest controls from Larry, and led the plane to disappear in a cotton field beyond the horizon. No one saw the crash, but the crowd saw the smoke, billowing in the sky on a bright, blue Sunday afternoon. I do not know if my mother was in the crowd, but I suspect she was. She was sixteen. He was 20.

- Four years later, in 1951, Mom dropped out of college to marry Joe Hayward, the man whose sister was Larry’s still young widow Nelda.
- Four years later I was born to that union, and given the name by which Larry went.

When I was growing up, Mom rarely spoke of her brother, but his dashing pictures in Navy blues and white cap were around the house, and I knew I bore his name.

When I was going through her papers following her death, I found in a tightly-sealed clear plastic envelop in a steamer trunk at the foot of her bed the full editions of the *Jonesboro Sun* and the *Memphis Commercial Appeal* the day after Larry’s death.⁴ Both papers had lengthy front-page articles on the crash, the details of which matched what I had been told as a child, by my father, not by my mother.

In the clear plastic – on top of these older papers – was another edition of the *Commercial Appeal*. It too had a bold headline, and billows of smoke against a bright blue sky. It was dated January 29, 1986, the day after the Challenger explosion. Thirty nine years after her brother’s death, the memory had not left her.

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In the three verses Luke devotes to Anna, the first describes her biography and heritage:

- “Daughter of Phanuel”
- “Of the tribe of Asher.”

Carolyn Hayward was:

- “Daughter of Robert Lawrence and Madge”
- “Sister of Larry Reese”
- “Wife of the brother of Larry’s widow.”

Looking at the newspaper of the Challenger explosion, I realized that her brother’s death likely explains the longing for *redemption* and appreciation of *community* that – like Anna’s – marked my mother’s life.

⁴ *The Jonesboro Sun* 9/1/1947; *The Memphis Commercial Appeal* 9/1/1947.

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The losses did not stop with her brother's death. In 1965 we moved to the suburbs and joined Germantown Presbyterian Church, when I was ten. My dad was an elder and building committee member; my mom was a deacon, elder, church treasurer, fifth grade Sunday School teacher, and for decades the tender of a small plot of land nestled between two buildings affectionately known as "Carolyn's Garden."

Nine years into our membership in that congregation, my father died a few weeks after receiving a diagnosis of cancer. My mom was 42. Two years later, she married, moved to Arkansas and divorced, all while I was in seminary. When she moved back to Germantown she moved into a duplex she had bought as an investment after my father had died, where she lived, widowed like Anna, until her 87th year. Her home was within sight of Germantown Presbyterian Church to which – like our friends at Agudas Achim – she often walked. Like Anna, Mom lived in the community of the church virtually her entire adult life, looking for redemption in the midst of loss.

III.

The second way my Mom resembled Anna is that within the community of faith, both found *redemption*.

Once Mom moved back to Germantown in 1979, to my knowledge she never dated nor was involved in a romantic relationship. But this past November a man who had joined the church ten years earlier – after the death of his wife – asked mom for coffee after worship. She accepted. They enjoyed one another's company. They talked. Pretty soon they developed a romance. It was he whom she had called when she knew she was sick.

Dick Linder is 91 years old. Courty. Distinguished. Still goes to the office three days a week. I had not met him until we were together in Mom's hospital room and I immediately saw what she saw in him.

He told Maggie and me a lot about their relationship. How they talked. How she shared about her family and brother. How they listened to my sermons together. And they watched movies together. A lot of movies. Always movies, he said, that *she* chose.

Dick then whipped out his cell phone and showed Maggie and me a selfie they had taken – look, he is 91 and I still have trouble taking a selfie. In this selfie, what you see a blanket, stretched out on a love seat and ottoman, at the end of which are four feet in stockings sticking up from underneath the blanket, and beyond which is a screen with a movie playing. Dick immediately assured me that early in their relationship they vowed not do anything under the blanket except watch movies.

At her Memorial Service, I quoted a poem by Louise Gluck entitled "The Queen of Carthage,"⁵ in which the poet praises the value of "honoring the hunger" for human love, even in the midst of loss. I thanked Dick for honoring that hunger with my mom, for helping her in the last six months of her life to find the redemption that comes with loving and being loved by another human being. And I hope he does not regret that honoring.

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⁵ *The New Yorker* 11/23/1998.

All my adult life, my mom and I have been respectful of one another. We talked on the phone about once a week, usually about church or sports. Our last conversation, the day before she got sick, was about this year's recruiting class for University of Memphis basketball.

Though we talked often, I have never described our relationship as particularly close. In fact, over the years, we rarely said to one another "I love you." Occasionally I would try it out at the end of a conversation, and she would respond, but it never seemed natural, never seemed fitting, and then it would go by the wayside for a decade or two. I wondered about that. I wondered about that a lot.

When Dick was showing me the feet sticking out from beneath the blanket, he blurted out: "You know, one thing I could never understand is that it was really hard for your mom to say 'I love you.' Maybe it was her upbringing. Maybe it was the loss of her brother, her husband. She just had a hard time saying it."

When Dick Linder told me that, within a few feet of the hospital bed in which my mom lay peacefully dying, it was like a weight was lifted from my shoulders. "It wasn't just me," I thought. I realized that too many people Mom loved had let her down or died young. I came to see that my relationship with my mother was not based on a high level of emotion nor a fluctuation of temperature, but on a deep, mutual respect. That was the nature of our love, and that was sufficient.

When we made the decision to remove Mom from the ventilator, her sedation was reduced to where she was awake for about thirty seconds. Maggie was able to tell her good bye. Her granddaughter Shelby was able to tell her good bye. My brother Steve was able to tell her good bye. And I was able to look her in the eye and say: "Mom, your whole family is here. We love you. I love you." She turned her head aside, smiled, went back to sleep. Twenty-four hours later, she took her last breath, Shelby holding her hand, Dick standing nearby. The entire week she had never been alone. She was indeed loved.

IV.

And finally in the story of Simeon and Anna, there is a word of *blessing* that is spoken following the redemption they receive.

"Now lettest thy servant depart in peace," says Simeon.

"Anna gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking for the *redemption* of Israel."

After Mom passed away, I stayed behind and signed the necessary paperwork. Then I went back into her room, put my hands on her covered feet, gave thanks to God that she was reunited with those who had gone before her, prayed that she was reunited *only* with those with whom she wanted to be reunited, and thanked God that she had died without ever knowing some of the things that I had suffered in my life.

I then left the hospital about noon, got in the car, and drove to sites throughout the city of Memphis that I had known growing up, some of which I had not visited in over fifty years.

- I walked the grounds of my old *elementary school*.
- I walked the horse show grounds where I had gotten my *first job*.
- I drove by the friend's house in whose pasture out back I had learned first to *ride*, and then, after being thrown, to *fear* horses.

- I drove by the homes of old girlfriends where I had experienced the *first flutter of adolescent attraction*.
- And I drove to places and sites where I had been *hurt* in ways I was glad Mom was *spared knowing*.

About 4:00 p.m. I realized how thirsty I was so I pulled into the Laurelwood Shopping Center where the store formerly known as Sears had once stood. I walked up to a Panera's. As I reached the door, a burly man, in a loose fitting shirt, shorts, and slicked back white hair, was coming out, helping a short, stocky, balding man, a bit older, who was struggling with a walker to get through the door. The burly man opened one door and I opened the other so the man on the walker came freely through, like Israelites crossing the Red Sea.

The burly man said, "Thank you."

Then the man on the walker looked up at me, and in a gruff Southern voice I had heard a thousand times, said "Your Momma woulda' been proud of you."

As I continued walking through the door, for a split second I thought about turning around and saying, "My mom passed away a few hours ago"; but I realized there was no reason to make the man feel bad.

But then I said to myself: "You know, she was. She was proud of me."

The man on the walker had given me a benediction, a word of *blessing*, which was as redemptive for me as the blessing Anna and Simeon received when they beheld the child of Mary and Joseph.

It is a benediction that every human being needs to hear – for even for those mothers who struggle to *say* they love and even for those mothers who struggle to *show* they love – at the deepest level *every* mother is proud of her child. *Every* mother.

So I ordered a plain bagel and tea, sat in a booth in an empty Panera's in my old hometown, on a sunny Saturday afternoon, Memorial Day Weekend, and let those words of blessing *begin* to sink in.

Amen.