

April 30, 2020

A few years ago, I wanted to learn about palliative care medicine, so I went to Mt Sinai Hospital in Manhattan to meet with their pastoral care team for palliative medicine. The head of that team was a young pregnant Jewish rabbi, her spouse, also, a woman.

This incredibly personal, intelligent, chaplain, was a very gifted young minister, who spoke confidently and competently about helping people through the really tough times in life when fear and anxiety run high and the future is uncertain.

Palliative care is not hospice but a wholistic approach to healthcare in which the patient is given access to a whole range of services that take seriously the context of the patient's life and is, actually, an ongoing conversation with the patient designed to let the patient actively participate in all aspects of care and treatment with a particular attentiveness to the emotional and spiritual life of that individual person.

Again, I am fully aware that this ideal is not possible with the current conditions but I am absolutely confident that legions of professionals-medical personnel to housekeeping and security- in hospitals all over the world are doing the best that they can to humanize the care and treatment of people ending their lives in truly devastating circumstances.

I have a very difficult time thinking about God in terms that do not assume a kind of CEO or Superintendent of Works or General Manager, and that is because in my Roman Catholic tradition and in virtually every other Christian and non-Christian religion the thinking has been closely controlled by men who understand their roles to be like a CEO or General Manager or some other kind of authority figure.

A pregnant woman, though, as a religious authority is a whole different image with a very different kind of presence.

I know that there are a host of scriptural, dogma, and institutional issues that could be discussed and that stereotyping genders is a dangerous practice, but a pregnant woman serving as God's presence in human form is worth reflecting on in these times, at least it is for me.

The "Glory of God" is a concept active in all of the Abrahamic religions and there are various words in Hebrew that have been translated in the English but one of them intrigues me in that the Hebrew word, 'shekinah,' which is a non-biblical word coined from many words to convey the "glory" of God as an indwelling presence, a heaviness or a fullness that is felt or can be felt, on earth and in creation.

An indwelling presence that is heavy and full, like a baby in the womb of a pregnant woman, perhaps?

I love the concept and it is easiest to work with at Christmas when we hear in Luke 2:9, speaking of the shepherds, that, "The angel of the Lord appeared to them and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were struck with great fear. The angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for behold, I proclaim to you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.'

Think how different it would be praying to a pregnant woman these days, than it is praying to a Boss Man.