

PRAY Loving God, you are Emmanuel, God with us. You come to us in Jesus. You reach out to us today in every child and friend. Bless our relationships that they may always reveal your love to others. Amen.



SPiRIT

By Katie Kromer

Marquelle, or Marky, is a young woman of 15 years who functions at the cognitive level of an 18-month-old child. She is developmentally disabled and physically handicapped because of a chromosome abnormality.

As a sophomore in high school, caring for Marky became one of my weekend babysitting jobs. I worked well in her rigidly scheduled environment with its set times for administering medications, eating, bathing, changing, relaxing, and exercising.

I arrive on Friday night in time to feed Marky dinner. She is sitting in her wheelchair. She has a long, slender body that will never stand fully erect. Her bony legs lift slightly from the footrests, quivering with excitement as I enter. I extend my hand toward her, anticipating her next move. She takes my hand, her skeletal fingers wrap tightly around mine, and she affectionately presses the side of her face against the back of my hand. I linger next to her briefly and then gently tug my hand free to focus on preparing her dinner.

I break Ritz crackers into fourths on the tray that conveniently slides



onto the armrests of her wheelchair. She picks up one piece and crunches down on it, relishing the independence of that single motion. Both of our eyes, however, focus on the small television set on the kitchen countertop.

The meal progresses, crackers crunching between my repeated spoonings of the main dish. An appreciative giggle or squeal of delight from Marky interrupts any silence as she reacts to the multitude of voices, colors, and sounds on the television.

Later that night, as I put her to bed, she raises her hands to my face, wiggling all her fingers, a request for “The Itsy Bitsy Spider.” She looks up at me expectantly from a mattress placed on the floor that allows her the independence to crawl freely and safely in and out of bed. I sing the song once, laughing at the applause I get from my audience of one.

Marky’s enthusiastic clapping soon subsides, and she forces her drowsy eyes to stay focused on me, intent on soaking up as much attention as

Marquelle’s Hands

possible. She rests contentedly, tucked in with a Barney pillow and Minnie Mouse sheets. Before I leave the room, I retrieve a towel to wipe away saliva gathering on her chin. I wave good-bye as I exit the room and receive a childlike wave in return.

Marky's life slowly begins to permeate mine. I no longer immediately wipe away the tiny drop of drool that drips from her mouth onto my shirt. Her room becomes as familiar to me as my own.

The wallpaper is sky blue with clouds embellished upon it. Infant angels with feathery wings and halos float on the ceiling. The room has little furniture, providing Marky an open area to crawl. A television set sits atop a dresser, pushed against one wall. A large turtle-shaped sand box overflows with toys near the door.

The routine I have come to love the most is Marky's greeting when I first arrive. Whether I enter with a smile on my face, a tired expression, or with tears in my eyes, I know that Marky will scoot her bottom next to mine until our shoulders are touching. She will stare at me with her glistening brown eyes and giggle until her mouth opens wide to expose her crooked, toothy grin and her small shoulders begin to shake.

When I return home after my first year of college, Marky is sick. At Hudson Hospital I find her sitting up in her wheel chair with an IV in her arm and an oxygen canula placed under her nose. It is her second week in the hospital, and pneumonia is still in her lungs. Despite her labored breathing, she manages a smile that glows on her sallow face.

Marky lifts her hands from her lap, her pointer fingers extended, bending up and down in a purposeful motion. I recognize this as her request for the song, "Where is Thumbkin." I put my hands up



in the air and lean my head close to Marky's ear.

I sing to Marky without thoughts of medications, meals, or diaper changes. I focus completely on her and the exclusive bond that I was unaware had formed so effortlessly between us.

Marky is still coping with chronic respiratory problems. I am her most regular caregiver during the summer months. I travel with her family to their summer home in northern Wisconsin and attend their family functions. This past summer her mother, her older sister, and I packed into the red, handicapped-accessible van to take Marky to Friendship Ventures, a special-needs camp.

Her sister will stay with Marky, because she requires constant care and has never spent a night away from her home. We pull into a rustic collection of small cabins and park the van among the masses of campers and counselors.

As I help settle Marky and her sister into their room, I am suddenly aware of my stomach churning as I walk from one side of the room to the other, unpacking. I notice the bed sitting high above the floor and the multitudes of counselors, to whom Marky's disabilities are only a concept. I know the vulnerabilities packaged in

her brittle body, and I worry that no one else does.

A counselor offers to take Marky, her sister, her mother, and me on a tour of the camp. I eagerly reach for the handles on her wheelchair. I clutch them as a nervous mother would her child's hand on the first day of school.

Our small party travels the cement paths through small cabins, a dining hall, and a recreational facility all overlooking a calm lake. Marky waves her hands with animated greetings to fellow campers and counselors that pass by; her excitement gradually loosens the white-knuckled grip with which I steer the wheelchair.

I kiss Marky goodbye later that day and leave with her mother. I know my reluctance to leave is only a small taste of the angst her mother is experiencing. At that moment, I feel the most responsibility I ever have for another human being. I know Marky in so many ways. She has been a job, a helpless child, and now a baby sister and friend. I cry, speak, laugh, and sing freely around her in a way that is different from all other relationships in my life.

I know that part of who I am I owe to her. I remain close to her regardless of when my shift ends. I no longer function as her caregiver, but instead as a guardian, cherishing the time I spend with her and worrying over the time spent apart.



SUNDAY GOSPEL

4th Sunday of Advent

Joseph decides to care for Mary, Jesus.

NARRATOR 1: This was how the birth of Jesus Christ took place. Mary, his mother, was engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found with child by the power of the Holy Spirit.

NARRATOR 2: Her husband, Joseph, a man who always did what was right, did not want to disgrace Mary publicly, so he decided to divorce her secretly.

NARRATOR 1: This was his intention when an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream.

ANGEL: Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary to be your wife. For by the Holy Spirit she has conceived this child. She will bear a son, and you will name him Jesus—because he will save his people from their sins.

NARRATOR 2: This happened in order to fulfill what God had said through the prophet: “A virgin will become pregnant and have a son, and he will be called Emmanuel,” a name which means “God is with us.”



NARRATOR 1: When Joseph awoke, he took Mary into his home as his wife, as the angel of the Lord had told him.

Matthew 1.18-24

As Marky’s mother steers the van away from her fragile daughter, she asks if I think she will be okay. The image of Marky and her sister waving from the stoop of their cabin fades in the distance, but the picture of Marky’s hand reaching to her mouth and confidently blowing a kiss into the air stays in my mind. She is okay, I say. With a kiss and a smile, Marky reveals the optimism, happiness, and resilience that most people struggle to gain in a lifetime.

When I speak of my relationship with Marky, the most common reaction is, “I really admire people like you.” A different response flashes in my mind. I may lift Marky into her wheelchair, but she is the one whose smile spreads widely across her face and whose welcoming hands tenderly guide more people into her life each day.

QUESTIONS 1 What gifts does Marky bring into Katie’s life? 2 How does she change Katie’s life? 3 How do Mary and her child change Joseph’s life? 4 How is Marky like Emmanuel? 5 How is Jesus Emmanuel?

OUR CATHOLIC FAITH

Jesus is Emmanuel, God with us

Prophets interpret events in history from God’s point of view. In his prophecies Isaiah promises God will one day send Israel a leader who will be God-with-us – Emmanuel. This leader will embody and make God present with us. This leader will build a kin*dom of shalom, the Jewish word for peace, among us.

Emmanuel will stand in contrast to Israel’s leaders in Isaiah’s time. The prophet is fed up with kings who take from the poor and lead the country into war. This is what Israel’s young 20-year-old King Ahaz is about to do in 735 B.C.

In Sunday’s first reading Isaiah tries to convince King Ahaz that peace is possible if he simply trusts in God. Just as we can sometimes find it difficult to convince ourselves and others that peace is possible in our world, Isaiah meets similar skepticism in Ahaz.

Neighboring kings want to take advantage of Ahaz’s inexperience. Pekah, king of Israel’s northern kingdom, and Rezin, king of neighboring Syria, are pressuring Ahaz to join in going to battle against superpower of their time—

Assyria. Ahaz is running scared. The king and his court tremble with fear like leaves in the wind, Isaiah reports.

God sends Isaiah to meet the young king and tell him he doesn’t need to fear. “Ask a sign of the Holy One, your God,” Isaiah says to Ahaz. “Let it be deep as the nether world or high as heaven.”

Ahaz refuses. “I will not ask,” he says. “I will not put God to the test.”

The king’s answer exasperates Isaiah. He asks sarcastically, “Is it too little for you to make mortals weary? Must you weary my God, too?” Isaiah gives Ahaz the sign he won’t ask for. The sign is a child.

A young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Emmanuel.

Isaiah 7.14

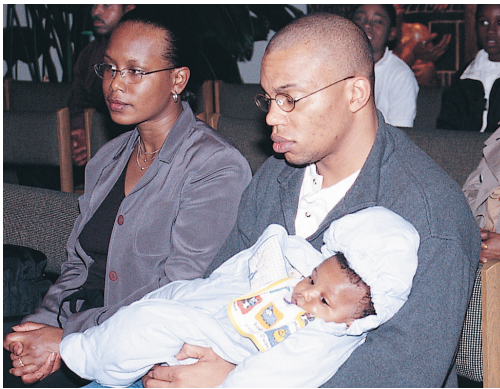
In this prophecy Isaiah is not so much foretelling the future as expressing his faith that God will be faithful to Israel and someday send a just king. At the time Isaiah’s words to Ahaz may have meant, “You’ll lose your throne. Right now a young woman is conceiving a child

For by his incarnation the Son of God has united himself in some fashion with every human. He worked with human hands, he thought with a human mind, he acted by human choice, and loved with a human heart. Born of the virgin Mary, he has truly been made one of us, like us in all things except sin.

Catechism of the Catholic Church, #521, 525

who will replace you as king, a real leader who listens to God and brings God's ways among us."

Isaiah also prophesies to Ahaz that before the child Emmanuel gets old enough to refuse evil and choose the good, the lands of the two kings whom Ahaz



fears will be desert. But Ahaz cannot trust this promise. He can't see trusting God as a viable foreign policy, so he voluntarily asks to become a vassal state of Assyria and sends gold and silver from the temple treasury to the Assyrian leader Tiglath-pileser.

Ahaz collaborates with the enemy and installs an Assyrian-style altar in the temple where Isaiah serves as a priest. Isaiah prophesies that Ahaz's faithlessness will bring destruction and defeat on his family.

Matthew wants us who hear the story of Jesus' birth to recognize God's faithfulness. Christians see in Jesus the child Isaiah promised centuries earlier. Jesus is Emmanuel.

In his ministry Jesus challenges us to lose our Ahaz attitudes and be less skeptical that peace and justice are possible. Jesus is God with us. He reveals in his every word and action what God is like. He shows us in human form that God heals the sick, forgives the sinner, blesses the least, works for justice and the liberation of the oppressed. He is the leader whose every action broadcasts ways to build in our world a community of shalom, a kin*dom that is whole and holy.

In Jesus, God is with us as one of us, as one who can touch and put his arms around us. From having God with us in Jesus, we Christians learn the infinite value of the love our hands, hearts, and minds can express.

Jesus shows us we can be like God by acting as he acted. Jesus helps us to see the possibility of peace and justice in this world, and our ability to work for these goals.

To act on our compassion for people in need and our passion for justice continues Jesus' mission of bringing peace on earth to all. Christmas is our feast because Jesus' incarnation continues in us.

FAITH in ACTION

- 1 What kind of sign was your birth in your family?
- 2 In what ways have you doubted the possibility of peace and justice? How does Jesus help alleviate these doubts?
- 3 What goals and aspirations for humankind does Jesus fulfill? What promises for humankind does Jesus make?
- 4 Make a banner expressing any and all of Isaiah's prophetic visions of peace for our world.

Dreaming **PEACE,**

praying for **PEACE**

What dream for the world would you like to participate in making come true? In Advent SPIRIT has explored visions of peace—Frodo's journey to destroy the ring; different ways teens work for social justice; our human capacity to draw others into our lives in friendship. Dreaming the wholeness and peace we want for ourselves and our world is part of developing a moral vision, a God's eye view of our potential for good and our freedom to love.

Dream is a word for positive aspirations, ideals, and goals but also for illusions and impossible fantasies. Draw or doodle to help bring to the surface a vision that expresses your deepest desires for our world, your deepest desires for yourself, for those you most care about, and for those most in need of your care.

- **Make a commitment to try one way to build peace and bring about positive change that you have learned about this Advent, whether through nonviolent communication, nonviolent action, community organizing, or creating art.**
- **Read Being Peace by Thich Nhat Hanh to learn even more ways to develop and spread peace in your daily life.**