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Sermon preached at Good Samaritan Episcopal Church on January 13, 2019

Year C, The Baptism of our Lord

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

“...The Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.’”

Eighteen years ago, I was a summer hospital chaplain at St. Luke’s Episcopal Hospital and Texas Children’s Hospital in Houston. Many of you know that, as part of our ordination process, Episcopal clergy are required to do a 12-week stint as chaplains to learn pastoral care skills, crisis management, and bedside manner. The whole point of a chaplaincy stint is to throw everyone into the pool to see who sinks or who swims...there’s very little direction at first, and it is sort of a trial by fire. I was 25 at the time (hard to believe I’m only 30 now, where did the time go?), though with my baby face, I looked more like a 17-year-old Doogie Howser-type chaplain, always surprising patients and their families every time I entered the room in my white clinical jacket with the word “Chaplain” embroidered in cursive just under the St. Luke’s logo.

By day, I was assigned to the children’s oncology floor at Texas Children’s Hospital, which was a real eye-opener for someone who never spent any time in a hospital before. By night and by weekend, I carried the pager and was on-call for emergencies, staying in a dedicated sleep room beside surgeons and others who waited to be paged for code blues and other crises. On the first day of orientation, I prayed that I never would have to visit the OB-GYN floor; of course, that was the unit I got paged to the most. My worst fears proved true every time I stepped foot on that unit. I was a 25-year old privileged upper middle class white guy. My polite Southern mother had instilled the fear of God in me about asking after anything related to any kind of “ladies’ surgery”--that is the blanket name she gave to all OB-GYN procedures, covering it all with veil of mystique and good manners. For that reason, I avoided eye contact with the no-nonsense nurses and obstetricians in the hospital cafeteria and hoped that no one would ever notice or call on me. Karma (the Holy Spirit?) had a different plan, and it seemed like every time that pager went off, it was for me, and it was the OB-GYN floor. I always felt like I was unknowledgeable, in the way, unrelatable, and generally an overall pest and goofball every time the elevators opened unto the fourth floor.

One thunderstormy July Saturday night, when thunder and lightning were preventing me from sleeping anyway, the pager suddenly burst its tune, summoning me to a birthing room. The nurse who met me at the desk seemed to intuitively pick up on my hesitancy to be there, but she had other patients to tend to and no time for my hangups. She handed me a sealed bottle of sterile water and said, curtly: “There’s a teenaged mother in that room who has just given birth to a very preemie baby; the baby’s survival is very unlikely and so we aren’t taking her to the NICU. The mom asked for a chaplain to come baptize her baby, so here’s your water. Go. You don’t have long.”

It seemed like I was paralyzed outside that door for hours, even though it was truly only 30 seconds. I gathered myself, summoned the best game face I could find, and entered the room. The mother, Amanda, who couldn’t have been more than 17, was scared and alone, presumably abandoned by her family, though I didn’t have time to ask her about that. After the normal greetings and pleasantries, I asked her: “What is your baby’s name?” “Jessica,” she responded. Jessica was so tiny, so fragile, so weak bundled in her mother’s arms, with more cords and tubes than baby.

“The nurse tells me you’d like to have Jessica baptized?” I said. “Yes,” she replied, tears welling up in her eyes. “I don’t want her to die.” “Of course,” I replied. Amanda told me she’d been baptized as a

14-year-old, in a giant dunking pool at a country Baptist church far away from downtown Houston where we found ourselves that night. Her baptism had been a life-changing event for her, and she wanted her newborn daughter, with only minutes left to live, to have this same experience.

I nervously unscrewed the cap of sterile water, sloshing water everywhere, fumbling through my pocket copy of the *Book of Common Prayer* to find the right page to start, and in doing so I must have appeared very flustered to Amanda as I stumbled to begin. “Are you nervous?” she asked me. “Yes,” I replied. “This is my very first Baptism. I’m not even a priest yet.” And then, in what can only be described as a providential moment, Amanda said this to me: “That’s okay...there’s no need to be nervous. I can show you how to do it if you need me to...what baptism is really all about is telling, showing the person you’re baptizing that God loves them, you know, like when the voice of God says it to Jesus when he was baptized? Baptism is just God saying the same thing to us, that we are all beloved, just like Jesus, as the water pours over our heads. That is all I want for my daughter to hear. There’s no way you can screw Baptism up. You’ll be fine. It’s all about God’s love.”

I can’t ever listen to the Gospel passage we hear today in Luke without thinking of Amanda and Jessica, and without thinking of the sermon she preached to me with very few words from her hospital bed that stormy night in July of 2000. As his cousin John dunks him into the Jordan River, surrounded by a crowd, Jesus emerges from the waters and the heavens open up. A voice from heaven says to Jesus: “You are my beloved. With you I am well pleased.” What Jesus does from that day forward with his ministry, his preaching, his teaching, his Cross, his Resurrection, his Ascension, is to show the world that he is beloved, that we are beloved, and that nothing we can ever do, or not do, will ever separate us from God’s love. The belovedness comes from God, and Jesus’ mission, his purpose, is to share that belovedness with us all.

“You are my beloved. With you, I am well pleased.” Aren’t those, really, the words we all long to hear from God? Our reading from the Book of Isaiah says the same thing another way: “Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.” Note that these words of God aren’t an insurance policy that nothing bad will ever happen to us and that we will be blissfully happy and without worry the rest of our lives; Amanda and Jessica could have told you that. But these words, this call of God to us, spoken by God since the beginning of time, are our assurance that God will never leave us, never abandon us, never forsake us.

As the miniscule drips of sterile water from the little plastic container poured over Jessica’s tiny head, they seemed like a fire hydrant. “Jessica,” I said. “I baptize you in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” I added: “You are God’s beloved. In you, God is well pleased.” Tears came to my eyes as Amanda and I celebrated something so simple, yet so profound. Amanda’s sermon is really true: there’s really no way we can really screw up our Baptism. It’s all about God’s love. In a world where we’re judged for everything else: our looks, our job performance, our bank accounts, our grades, our credit score, there is nothing but belovedness that God has for you and me, envisions for you and me, holds for you and me, or plans for you and me.

In a moment, the baptismal waters will flow over Abigail Kathleen Smets. Hopefully, the priest will be a little more confident this time around than he was 18 years ago in that Houston hospital room. In fact, I know he will be, because Amanda and Jessica and all of the company of heaven will join me as we gather at the snowy banks of the, er, um, White Lick Creek here this morning. And as the water flows over Abby, the heavens once again will open up, and a voice from heaven will proclaim: “Abby,

you are my beloved. In you, I am well pleased.” As we stand and witness Abby’s baptism this morning, as we welcome her into the household of God, as we come forward during Communion and cross ourselves with the baptismal waters, can we hear that voice and remind ourselves, refresh ourselves with the notion that we, too, are beloved in God’s eyes? Can we hear Amanda’s sermon with fresh ears: there’s no way to screw this up!

So, before I leave you, the rest of the story, as Paul Harvey used to say. Monday morning came back around, and I resumed my normal chaplain duties on the Children’s oncology floor and the OB-GYN chaplains took charge of their floor and of Amanda and Jessica. I resigned myself that I might never hear how it all turned out, until about three weeks later. I was in the hospital lobby getting onto an elevator, and out came Amanda. It was one of those cases of seeing someone out of context, so it took a minute for us to both recognize each other just as the elevator doors were closing: “Oh hi!” she said. “Jessica turned out to be a miracle baby...she’s now in the NICU. She’s got a long road ahead of her, but she’s got a great chance at making it now.” I told her, the doors closing, “I won’t ever forget her Baptism.” And I haven’t.