

Grace, mercy and peace to you from the voice of the Lord, the God of glory, our Lord upon the waters.¹ Amen.

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The old pastor was two months shy of ninety-six when he came to pour baptismal water over the fresh life of a six-month-old baby girl. His wobbly legs required an armchair to be placed in the sanctuary so he could sit for the service. Lifted from the font, the basin was set on his lap; the child was cradled carefully at his heart. Water washed down again — as for the first time — from steady, experienced hands. And he spoke clearly, voicing the familiar words — *our family's holy words*: “You are baptized in the name of the Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit.” And as the Good Spirit swept over, he smiled. A candle was lit. And God saw that the light was good.² Amen.

I loved that old pastor. He had been present when I was baptized, had witnessed my confirmation, had given the charge when I became an eagle scout, had supported my education and traveled to celebrate my graduation from seminary. That pastor's capable hands were the same hands that first laid the stole of public ministry over my shoulders on the night of my ordination. He was the pastor who preached God's word at my wedding. And I was the pastor — yoked in his stole — who preached God's word at his funeral, commending him to the gospel promise, now *another* giving voice to the familiar words — *our church family's holy words*: “All of us who have been baptized in Christ Jesus were baptized into his death ... so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.”³

Like a figure of the Apostle Paul — who passed through the interior regions of Turkey and came to quiz young disciples on matters of the Holy Spirit⁴ — I thank God for the memory of a missionary journey that old pastor once made from Pennsylvania to visit me in New England as I served in my first call among God's people, asking me: “Have you memorized the scriptures yet?” I was wordless (for once), wondering what kind of reply he expected. But the Good Spirit swept over, and his face smiled; he spoke clearly, voicing the familiar words — *this family's holy words*: “In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth; for God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.”⁵ With six decades of sermons under his alb — *enough time to fill the earthly life of Christ twice over* — this was the wisdom my loving old pastor had to share: his faith, that children need to know their parent's love for them; that all God's children need to know how their creator, for love's sake, gives everything to keep them safe for good.

I loved that old pastor — and he loved me. I share his story to reflect how strange it is — how odd, a mere handful of seasons since our mortal goodbye — that I no longer clearly recall the actual sound of his voice. His words abide with me in the familiar clarity of biblical quotations. The holy breath he shared with me — *such inspiration of life and faith held together* — still fills my lungs like so many prayers and pulpits and sanctuaries and conversations. But his voice? Too few recordings. I struggle to remember the sound of his voice — its timbre, its tone, its rise and fall and rise.... How can I so clearly recall so much, yet struggle to recall that voice? With a certain longing, I am reminded again of my deeper struggle to recall the voice of love, to know the voice of God.

“In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth, while God's breath swept over the waters, God spoke clearly the holy words of our family: ‘Let there be.’”⁶ And it was good — the voice of the Lord is so good:

¹ Psalm 29:3,

² Genesis 1:4a

³ Romans 6:3-5

⁴ Acts 19:1-2

⁵ Genesis 1:1; John 3:16

⁶ Genesis 1:1-3

thundering over our mighty waters; powerful and splendid; breaking the tree of Calvary and making the hill of Golgotha cavort like a young wild ox; shaking the wilderness and stripping the leaves of the trees behind which we hide our shame. To hear such a voice, the clear and creative voice of God's love for your life and mine, what would I do — and how else would you join me — but to cry, "Glory!"⁷ If we have ever woken from a dream in which the beloved saints of our lives spoke or laughed or echoed "I love you" in voices that open our hearts with joy to remember, then we may well trust it will be glorious to rise up and recall the voice of the Lord who speaks to us familiar words — *God's family's holy words*.

Now, in the icon of Christ's baptism, Jesus — *the Word who is God, the Word Made Flesh, Grace and Truth, Grace upon Grace, Emmanuel, God With Us* — the image of Jesus is clear enough to see.⁸ This Word — *Jesus* — abides with us, a body arisen where all barriers between earth and heaven tear apart.⁹ As our skins are washed in his baptism and our spirits are filled with his life, our most central identity becomes inseparably joined with God in Jesus, and we are called to discern God's face on all those who share our days.¹⁰ Therefore, we come to know how God appears among us: human, one like us.¹¹ We are also graced in Jesus' baptism to experience the Holy Spirit sweeping over the face of the waters, hovering over that holy moment like a dove, fluttering wings that we cannot pin down — wings of God's good breath we yet trust will fly with us.¹²

God's word and God's breath are easy to behold like this. But God's voice for us? The voice from heaven that speaks parental pride to Jesus, that showers praise on Jesus, that claims Jesus as a pleasure to know and as a child to love? Will we perceive that voice — *God's voice* — clearly speaking these words to us — for me — for you? But, friends, it is the voice of the Lord who speaks these familiar words for you. The voice of the Lord gives voice to these holiest words of the family we share in Christ Jesus, his baptism, his cross, his new life, his grace: "You are my child, my beloved; with you I am well pleased."¹³ By grace, we receive this voice for our life.

I still struggle. When Saint Paul quizzed those disciples on the Turkish coast, they struggled too. It was hard for them to hear good news as their own, but as the voice of the Lord was proclaimed for them — *as baptismal life in Christ lavishly laid this voice of God's "love for Christ" as a stole on their own shoulders to preach good news* — suddenly those old disciples opened their mouths and the voice of the Lord broke forth from them for all the earth to receive.¹⁴

Children long to know their parent's love for them. All God's children ought to know how our creator, for love's sake, gives everything to keep us safe for good. Joined to Christ in baptism, receiving this call from the voice of heaven as our own, what else will we do but cry, Glory! — and pour forth God's gospel like grace on a six-month-old baby girl, and on every child cradled close to God's sacred heart, giving living voice to our family's oh so holy words: "You are my child, my beloved; with you I am well pleased."

The voice of the Lord is upon the waters. Amen.

⁷ Psalm 29:3-9

⁸ John 1:14, 16; Matthew 1:23

⁹ Mark 1:9-10

¹⁰ Matthew 25:40; Romans 8:38-39; Galatians 2:20; 3:27; 1 Peter 3:21; 1 John 4:12

¹¹ Philippians 2:5-8; Hebrews 4:15

¹² John 14:16-17; see also 1 Corinthians 2:9-13

¹³ Mark 1:11

¹⁴ Acts 19:4-6