

Abba's Blessing

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We begin with a story, a story of initiation, an inauguration, if you will. Picture this: A young man, nearly thirty, walks down to a riverside, to meet another young man—a wandering preacher-prophet wearing clothes made of camel's hair, *a wild kind of dude*. He is immersing folks in a wide, flowing river. “Repent,” he cries out, “for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” Peering up in the sunshine to see the newcomer walking down the bank to the river, the preacher is taken aback. Who is this one shining in the afternoon sun? Could it be Jesus? As the book of Matthew tells it, the preacher, known as John the Baptist, cannot fathom the reality: “Why do you come to me?” John says to him. “Rather, I need to be baptized by you!”

Indeed, the Early Church and gospel writers struggled to understand why Jesus, the sinless one, would choose to be baptized. One gospel text that didn't make it into the New Testament canon explained it this way: Jesus went to be baptized by John in order to please his mother! Hearing the answer Jesus gives to John in Matthew's gospel, we do not find much more to go on: “Let's just do this, John,” Jesus seems to say. “It is necessary to do everything God requires.” And so John baptizes Jesus in the flowing waters of the Jordan.

What happens next is one of the most beautiful moments in all of Scripture. When Jesus comes up from the water, a dove flies down and alights upon his shoulder, and a voice from heaven is heard: “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.” Or as another version puts it, “This is my Son whom I dearly love. I find happiness in him.”

In this out-of-time moment, we witness a blessing, the blessing of Abba, “Daddy,” as Jesus called God in his first language of Aramaic. In our mind's eye, we see the Heavenly One, like an adoring father, gazing down upon his precious newborn, and we hear a Divine Voice, like a mother, speaking with infinite tenderness, to her young child. It would be this heavenly voice that would echo in Jesus' head for the rest of his life.

Many of us saw hints of such a blessing this past week, when Barack Obama placed the Medal of Freedom, the highest civilian honor in our country, on Joe Biden's neck. The look on Biden's face is priceless: eyes shining, a look of humble astonishment. I hardly ever buy a paper off the newsstand, but I had to buy the newspaper with this photo. A man with almost a half a century of public service under his belt, overcome by a blessing!

So the question comes to you, to me. When have we received this kind of baptismal blessing? Of course, the ritual of baptism is a beautiful thing, but I am thinking about the unbidden kind, the one you didn't see coming. Perhaps you received this unconditional blessing from a parent—perhaps from a mentor, lover, spouse, or friend.

Maybe your sense of belovedness came not from a person, but through an experience. Perhaps there was a moment in nature when the sunlight poured through the trees and a warmth filled you with a sensibility that you could only describe as divine. Or perhaps in the midst of incredibly beautiful sacred music, you knew without knowing how you knew, that God was present to you in great love. Or maybe you discovered yourself beloved when you looked into the eyes of your own child for the first time. You knew God was there, and that this same Love beyond comprehension was within you and within the little one you cradled. Love's baptism, Divine grace felt viscerally.

I was 30 years old, teaching English in two small colleges in Salisbury, NC, sensing an impending loss that I could not yet put words to. I felt depressed and lonely. I was running errands after class and heading for home, when suddenly I was engulfed by something I couldn't describe. Utter and joyous love filled the car and seemed to pour out through the windows to everyone I saw on the street. I remember thinking: "Should I stop driving?" But I was afraid to stop and interrupt the Love flowing through me. Slowly as I drove, the sense of absolute wonder and magnificent love lessened. Gently leaving, but there still. And as it would turn out, this mystical moment would help me through a difficult chapter of my life, and it resides with me now, like a quiet dove on my shoulder.

To remember our belovedness to God, even when we don't feel it, is to return to the fulcrum of our being; for this Divine Love for each and every one of us is unwavering. God looks upon each of us with adoring love; and we, while **not** the sinless one, carry an incarnation of divinity, however dimmed by ego or shame, despite what we have done or not done—and whether or not we have officially entered the waters of baptism.

For as hard as it may be to comprehend, we all bear God's image within us. The mystic, Julian of Norwich, tells us that there is a part of every soul that is "oned" to God, and no matter what, our soul will never be separated from God. Franciscan priest and writer Richard Rohr notes that though we are wont to make Jesus the only Child of God, the second mystery of the Trinity—we must not forget that the Divine imprint is within us, too.

Martin Luther King, Jr., whose life and ministry, mission for justice and martyrdom, we remember today, met waters of baptism in the Ebenezer Baptist Church

of Atlanta, Georgia as a boy. But just as surely, he knew the blessing of baptismal love from his parents. In his autobiography, Daddy King recalls a holy moment of awakening zeal in the six-year old ML (as the family called him). ML had seen some shoes he loved and his father wanted to buy them for him—but the white clerk refused, unless they would go the back of the store. Daddy King stood firm: they were comfortable in the front of the store, and if the clerk wouldn't sell the shoes to them there, they would leave. As they left, ML was confused. Why could they not get the shoes? Daddy King recalls:

ML stared at me in the car and asked me to explain the whole thing again. And I said that the best way to explain it was that I'd never accept the stupidity and cruelty of segregation, not as long as I lived. I was going to be fighting against it...as long as there was breath in me. He still looked puzzled. But he nodded his head and told me that if I was against it, he would help me all he could. He was such a little fellow then, but sitting there next to me in the car, ML seemed so thoughtful and determined...that I felt certain he wouldn't forget his promise to help.¹

As the life and martyrdom of our beloved savior, Jesus, teaches us—we know that baptism is also a baptism **into** the world God loves and seeks to save with every breath. And as any parent knows, you cannot spare your child from the experience of pain; you can only help her or him with all that you can muster.

We just have to keep remembering—we just need to keep leaning on those Everlasting Arms! In times of deep weariness or pain, Abba's blessing is there, too. And we will be reminded of our holy birth, of the call upon our lives—even in the midst of despair.

Maybe you know the story about Mother Pollard. During the bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama, some boycotters declined rides even from fellow protestors, and over the many long months, persisted in walking miles to and from work. King was distressed that some like the elderly Mother Pollard were suffering, so he admonished her and others to stop. "I'm going to walk as long as everybody else walks," she retorted. "But aren't your feet tired?" King said. "Yes," she answered, "but my soul is rested."

Another time, Mother Pollard heard King preach and told him that "he didn't talk strong" that day. But in her next consoling breath, she added, "I done told you we is with you all the way...but even if we ain't with you, God's gonna to take care of you." After that, King would often echo Mother Pollard's blessing in his speeches: "God's gonna take care of you."

¹ *Daddy King: An Autobiography* (William Morrow & Co, 1980).

During that same Montgomery bus boycott, threats of physical violence battered King's soul. One night, after receiving yet another threat over the telephone, King, a new father, had reached his limit. At the kitchen table, he cried out in prayer, "I am afraid...I am at the end of my powers. I have nothing left. I've come to the point where I can't face it alone." In this moment, King recalls, "I felt the presence of the Divine as I have never before experienced him. It seems as though I could hear the quiet assurance of an inner voice, saying, 'Stand up for righteousness, stand up for truth, God will be at your side forever.'"² It would called King's "kitchen experience" of God! When his house was actually bombed three days later, he reflected that he took the news with an "inner calm."

Jesus, Dorothy Day, Martin Luther King, Jr, Oscar Romero, Desmond Tutu all speak to the reality that the Divine blessing, the Divine baptism, is no inoculation against pain, against what is hard and evil in this world. Even though Jesus was the Son of the Most High, Abba's beloved Child, the fullest incarnation of the Creator: *even He, the Anointed One*, could not, would not avoid the cup of suffering he was given to drink.

For me, this week comes with a deep joy, and with a deep concern. On Friday, my daughter turns 13; what gladness I feel for her precious life! I also feel dread, as that day, the inauguration of our President-Elect becomes a reality.

What will become of some of the very freedoms Martin Luther King, Jr., fought for? What harm may befall the least of these Jesus came to save? But then I remember, God is still here, and Love is more powerful than fear! *And despite the forecast for freezing rain, the sun is still shining behind those clouds! And that light will keep on shining, no matter one man or one administration! We are simply called to keep on walking, like Mother Pollard told us to do.*

Now, hear this echo of the blessing from Desmond Tutu that Emily read to us:

"Dear Child of God
Each of us carries a piece
of God's heart within us.

And when we love one another,
the pieces of God's heart are
made whole.

God dreams that every one of us will
see that we are all brothers and sisters--

²King, *Stride Toward Freedom* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1958), 134-5.

Even if we speak different languages
Even if we have different eyes or
different skin.

Dear Child of God,
do you know how to make
God's dream come true?
It is really quite easy.

As easy as sharing, loving, caring.
As easy as holding, playing, laughing.

As easy as knowing we are family
because we are all God's children."³

A-men, and a-men!

³ Archbishop Desmond Tutu and Douglas Carlton Abrams, with illus. by LeUyen Pham, *God's Dream* (Candlewick Press, 2008).