

Baptism of the Lord 2022 C

Today, I think of Maggie, whom I was honored to baptize on New Year's Eve, 1993 before she was airlifted to St. Cloud. Maggie's pregnancy had complications all along. Just after the vigil Mass for Mary, Mother of God, I saw another mother holding her child, as Mary would have held Jesus; and I baptized Maggie into the life of Christ in her hospital room. *Though only a few of us were there, her connections were as broad as the Communion of Saints and as deep as the infinite love of God.* She shared in the dying and rising of Jesus; and then she was bundled up to the helicopter, and I didn't know if I would ever see her again. While the gift of eternal life is the same for each child in Baptism, *that promise and the comfort it brings again came into special focus, when the beginning seemed so near the end for Maggie.*

What gives you comfort? Comfort is a word full of personal associations for each of us ... a perfect cup of coffee, a favorite chair, a clear schedule, your favorite pastime. Maybe comfort means knowing the ones you love are safe, that a problem has been settled, that all is well. These pleasant images of comfort do not carry the same weight when we are in the midst of suffering ... for the sick, those far from home and family, those who live amid war and want and hunger, those who survive natural disaster or violence or some tragic loss. Then, comfort may involve simple things for the body, but even deeper things for the soul ... reassurance, a word of concern and encouragement, a gesture of kindness, a quiet caring presence, *to know that some better future awaits beyond present sorrow.*

Comfort, give comfort to My people, says the Lord. Comfort is the first word of the second part of Isaiah's prophecy, a word to console a suffering people with the nearness of God to heal and to set things right.

This feast often raises the logical question: Why did the sinless and divine Son of God need baptism? The best answer I have found is exactly this nearness of God that brings us comfort – to know, as Paul puts it, that nothing can separate us from the love of God. At the beginning of His public ministry, by accepting Baptism Jesus begins to unite Himself with the brokenness and weakness of the human family.

Remember that His very next destination is the desert, there to undergo temptation – again experiencing

in His humanity all that would separate us from God's peace and wholeness. And this leads Him ultimately to the Cross, where He so profoundly enters into every human loss and tragedy – both those past and those yet to be – that He speaks those infinitely chilling words on Calvary: “My God, my God, why have you abandoned Me?” These words that speak of the sense of God's absence are precisely and paradoxically the enduring reassurance of God's unending nearness to us in our needs. Because Jesus has accepted this human pain, we never need fear that God will leave us without mercy, love, and help. ***It is comfort for our spirits to know that we have been called by name – because each of us is SOMEONE, not something – and that we belong unfailingly to Jesus with a share in His life that cannot be taken away, a share given most of us long before we had any achievements or virtues to deserve it. Baptism comforts us with the pure, unalloyed love of God, regardless of who we are in the eyes of anyone else.***

Take a few minutes this week to look at your baptismal pictures, or those of your children or grandchildren; pray to the saint for whom you are named and who prays for you; say a word of thanks to your parents – living or deceased – for bringing you to the life of faith; make the Sign of the Cross with the holy water with particular care, and remember that wherever you go from here, you remain a Child of God, Whose love never abandons us.

Maggie responded to treatment that night, and today she is a bright and rather feisty 30-something-year-old. I have not seen her for years. But I will always remember how her life in Christ began, surrounded by the faith and love of her family and the gift of eternal life in Jesus. The words the Father spoke from heaven about His Son came true for her, and are also true for each of us who are reborn in Baptism – You are my beloved.