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Episcopal Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa, CA

September 19, 2021

Year B, Proper 20, Track 2, Revised Common Lectionary

[Wisdom of Solomon 1:16-2:1, 12-22](#)

[Psalm 54](#)

[James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a](#)

[Mark 9:30-37](#)

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When I was about three, my most beloved love objects were two floppy blue cloth bunnies. Their names were Bunny, and Other Bunny. I slept with them every night, but sometimes they came other places with me. So one Sunday at church, I came forward to the communion rail with my family—and accidentally dropped Bunny over the edge of the rail.

It was a scary moment. I'd never been on the other side of that rail before, but I could tell it was holy ground. The holy table was there. Communion came from there. The people in there moved about in special robes doing mysterious and holy things. It was like a kind of Mount Sinai, a place set apart. I thought for sure I would never see my bunny again. I started to cry. And then our priest came over. He knew me. He smiled at me and said it was OK and gave me my bunny. We had communion and all was well.

It's a story I often tell people when we're talking about my own story of faith, or about children's spirituality. As I look back I realize I was blessed by a childhood experience of church where I knew two things deep in my bones. One was that this was a place of awe, a place to meet God, the living God. Here I could sense what the philosopher Rudolf Otto called the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, the great mystery that is tremendous and fearful, yet also captivating and fascinating. Children have a deep, deep sense of the numinous, the awesome, the sacred, and my experience of the liturgy as a child carried that. And the second thing I knew at the same time was that this was a place where I was loved, and safe, and cared for, and where I mattered. My bunny was not to be lost, not demanded as a sacrifice or exacted from me as the cost of straying into forbidden territory. It turned out this sacred mystery was for me too.

Sometimes people try to talk about how important children's ministry is by saying, "You know, children are the church of tomorrow." Which is well-intentioned, but the truth is children are part of the church of today: not members-in-waiting but full members in good standing with their gifts to contribute and their ministries to exercise.

Next month we are relaunching our children's ministry programs, starting with children's chapel: a special opportunity for children roughly preschool through elementary ages to celebrate the Liturgy of the Word in their own way during the first half of the 10:00 service. And as we start, my prayer is that we as a faith community can build an environment for our children that gives them something like what I received: that ushers them into the presence of the deep awe-inspiring mystery of God, and also equips them with the conviction that they are cherished and beloved by God beyond measure, and that they are full members of the Body of Jesus Christ.

There's a danger in starting up a children's chapel program. The danger is segregating our kids into a separate and unequal space. The danger is in sending the message that kids don't belong in big church but need something different. We can help guard against that in a couple of ways. One is to keep reiterating the message that kids are always welcome in church, period. Children's chapel is something we are offering as an opportunity, not mandating as a way to get kids out of the grown-ups' space. The message isn't "Oh, here's the place for the likes of you" but "Welcome! This place is for you, and also here is an opportunity you might like to take advantage of." Children's chapel isn't child care, nor is it Sunday school; it's liturgy, and it's a kind of scaffolding where our children will learn the habits and skills of worship: singing God's praises, hearing and responding to scripture, praying for their own needs and the needs of the world. And then our children will always come back to rejoin their families at the Peace to share in the Liturgy of the Table which is their birthright from the moment they're baptized into the Body of Christ.

When Jesus foretold his suffering a second time, and the disciples again failed to understand, he spoke to them about servanthood, and about how in God's realm the greatest is the one who is last of all, least of all. And he picked up a little child. He embraced that child and told them, "Whoever welcomes a little child like this in my name, welcomes me, and not just me but the one who sent me."

We in the 21st century might think about childhood and think primarily of associations like innocence or playfulness or cuteness. But that's not what Jesus has at front of mind. In the ancient world people weren't as sentimental about childhood as we are today. They couldn't afford to be. For one thing, childhood was dangerous. Families had many children knowing there was a strong chance not all would reach adulthood. For another thing, childhood wasn't a sheltered time of play and growth. Children often worked to help support their families. Jesus is speaking about a child not as a symbol of innocence or cuteness but as a symbol of powerlessness and vulnerability: a person with no legal rights, no control over their own destiny, dependent on others for flourishing and well-being and survival itself. That's what it means to be a child in the ancient Mediterranean. And it's also what it means to be a child for so many children today. This week UNICEF warned that up to a million children in Afghanistan are at risk of starvation this winter. Children around the world suffer from poverty and lack of health care. Children labor to support their families. And children suffer from trauma and abuse, not just in other places but here in our community.

Jesus says that whoever welcomes a child welcomes him. And children are not insulated from the realities of this world held captive to sin. Nor are they incapable of loving and serving others in Jesus' name.

Today we are baptizing Cole Jackson Trowbridge into the Body of Christ. This is a great day, a joyful day. Cole is little; he's a toddler. He is cute. And we should enjoy that. But this baptism is also not just a baby show, and it's not about cuteness. It's about a matter of life and death; it's about the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*. It's about bringing Cole before the awesome, living, tender, and loving God who formed him in the womb, who has known him since before his first breath, and bringing Cole into the family of faith, the gathering of God's holy people, the very Body of Jesus Christ. It's about bestowing the fullness of the royal priesthood of Jesus on this little person, who will grow into it just like all of us do, but who is no more or less worthy of it than any grown-up.

It's about the beginning of a life that will bless Cole and also challenge him, to choose some paths and not others, to live in ways of love and blessing. It's about our commitment to help shape and nurture Cole in the way of Jesus, but it's also about our commitment to let Cole shape and nurture us—to honor and recognize his ministry and the ministry of all the children among us, who teach us new things about God, who sometimes lead us, just as the prophet Isaiah said: a little child shall lead them.