

Homily
16 Pentecost, Proper 19, Year C, 2010
The Reverend Ted W. Smith
St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, Liberty, Texas

In January of last year, my youngest son was fortunate to have the opportunity to be a part of history in the making. He travelled to Washington D.C. with a school group to attend the inauguration of the first African-American president of the United States. Even though there were several teachers and adult chaperones going along, I don't mind admitting that I was more than a little anxious at allowing my 10 year old to make the trip. Along with the 600,000 people who live in Washington, it was estimated that approximately one million visitors were in the city to witness the historic event. And my fears were realized when I received a cell phone call one afternoon, with a small, frightened voice at the other end: "Dad? I can't find my group." I tried to remain calm. "Where are you, son." "Arlington National Cemetery." "Are there any other people around you?" "Yeah, a whole lot." "Do you see a policeman in the crowd?" "No, but I found a security guard and he's with me now." So I told him to stay with the security officer, hung up and promptly called one of the teachers on her cell. In less than five minutes he was reunited with his group and all was well. But for a few moments I experienced sheer panic at the thought of my little lost lamb among throngs of potential wolves.

Have you ever lost something temporarily? A child at the supermarket? Your wallet, your purse, or your car keys? Makes for some pretty anxious moments or hours, doesn't it? And we of the Christian faith usually whisper a little prayer, "Oh Lord, please help me find what I lost." And when we do find it, we usually offer up a little prayer of thanks. "Thank you, Jesus!" as we clutch our keys, or purse, or the hand of our child.

I love the stories Jesus tells in our Gospel lesson for this morning about the lost sheep and the lost coin. I especially like it when Jesus says, "There is joy in heaven over one sinner who repents." "There is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

What we do here today, or rather what the Holy Spirit will do here today, will keep a little lamb named Cayden from ever being lost. At least from being permanently lost. The outward and visible sign of baptism by water will invoke the inward and spiritual grace that will put Cayden in union with Christ in his death and resurrection, give her new birth into God's family the Church, grant her forgiveness of sin, and new life in the Holy Spirit.

But this is not only Cayden's journey. We all play a part in this baptism, to do all that we can to ensure that this child never loses her way.

Mom and Dad, you are the primary role models for this child – the primary teachers. What will you be teaching? From you, this baby will learn respect. She will learn reverence and piety, patience and compassion. From you she will learn how to get up when she falls, how to persevere when she has setbacks. She will learn how important her faith and the church are in her life. But she will learn this only if it is important in yours. Most importantly, from you, she will learn to love. Always strive to make your home a place of love, a safe, warm place, a place of peace.

Grandma, from you this child will learn maturity and confidence. She will learn how to sacrifice for the good of the family. From you she will learn generational love. She will learn that even though some of our loved ones are not with us every day, love does not grow dim with distance and separation, but only grows stronger.

Godparents, you will be the first witnesses to this child's upbringing. You are the custodians of the faith. Keep your eyes, ears and hearts open. Is your godchild being taught to pray? Is your godchild growing up in the church? Are the fundamentals of the faith - prayer, sacrifice, Christian teaching, the sacraments, simple devotions – are they a part of this child's life?

And to this congregation: in a moment you will become witnesses to the promises made by the parents and godparents of this child, that Cayden will be brought up in the Church, and will be taught to know and follow Christ. And you will promise that by your prayers and your witness, you will help Cayden grow into the full stature of Christ. You will become her extended family.

Will you be a true representative of Christ and his Church to her? As she grows, will you help her take her place in the life, worship and governance of the church? You must do everything you can to support this family in the raising of this child. And that may include phone calls, visits, and many kind and supportive words and actions.

You see, Holy Baptism is not just a quaint little ceremony we have, where we sprinkle a little water on a baby's head. It is so much more. It is a sacred event whereby even an innocent baby can share citizenship in the Covenant and the kingdom, can share membership in the body of Christ, and share in the redemption of God's people.

Finally, I want to address Cayden herself. You may not understand these words, but perhaps someone will pass them on to as you grow. In a few moments the holy waters of baptism will pour over your precious little head. But that is not when you become a child of God. You became God's child at the moment you were conceived. You were God's child when you were taken from your mother's womb. You will be God's child as you begin to walk on wobbly little legs, and begin to speak in broken, baby sentences. You will be God's child as you grow into adolescence, and in about 12 years or so, if you are brought to church and to Sunday School, and are taught your faith, you will stand in this place before God, and a bishop of the Church, and your church family, and make your mature confession of the faith and hope that is in you. And you will grow and mature into a beautiful young woman, and if it is God's will, you will marry and have children of your own, and bring them up in the faith. And you will grow wise with age, and watch your children and grandchildren grow up, and your eyes will grow weak and your bones will grow tired, and you won't feel like a child. But you will still be God's precious child.

And there will be times in your life when you will feel lost. But like the good shepherd, God will always be there, and he will always go and find you, and help you find your way. I hope you are taught by your parents and grandparents and godparents and your church family that God will never ever abandon you. And I hope you will always remember that.

Today is the beginning of your journey with the family of God. Your journey with a loving savior in Jesus Christ. Today, like the Gospel reading says, although you are an innocent babe and haven't even learned what sin and repentance is, there is joy in heaven as you officially enter God's holy church. There is joy in the presence of the angels of God over you, and all the angels and saints in heaven are rejoicing and praising God and giving thanks for you. Can you hear them? I think I almost can. And I can almost hear the gentle, loving voice of Jesus as he cradles you in his arms, smiles at you and tickles your chin and says, "Welcome home, my precious, precious child. Welcome home."

Amen