

Rev. Dr. Anne Bain Epling
First Presbyterian Church
April 14, 2024
John 20:19-31

“A Letter to Avalynn Renee Carlson on the Occasion of her Baptism”

Dear Ava,

Today is a very special day in your life. Your mom and dad, your family, friends of your family, members of the session, and members of First Presbyterian Church dedicated you to God. They acknowledged that you are God’s child, they promised to guide and nurture you with love and prayer, encouraging you to follow Christ, and they heard me say, “Avalynn Renee Carlson, you have been sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism, and marked as Christ’s own forever.”

Now I have said plenty of times, Ava, but it’s worth repeating again: I love to baptize children (and adults) more than anything else because there’s just an overwhelming joy for me at knowing that I was there with you at the beginning of your journey of faith. There’s also an overwhelming feeling of awe for me, even 28 years into my ministry, that I can baptize people because everything begins in your baptism, Ava. It inaugurates a whole new life for you. But there’s an overwhelming feeling of responsibility, too, because everyone here will promise before you and God to guide and nurture you and help you to know Christ better.

You see we believe that at the heart of all our relationships is our baptism. Your baptism today is a sign and seal that God loves you, that God has called you to be in this special relationship, and that God is with you forever.

And although you may not fully understand what is happening, we baptize children because Presbyterians believe that you are a part of God’s family and are included in God’s family from the moment you’re born.

On the Sunday we baptized you, we were still celebrating Easter and heard the widely known story of Doubting Thomas, the disciple who doesn't believe that Jesus has risen until he sees and touches him. We traditionally hear this story on the Sunday after Easter, but since we were doing Hands On Fort Wayne last Sunday, and since this is one of my favorite Easter stories, I saved it for today. Plus, I think it has a lot to teach someone who is being baptized and has good reminders for all of us who have been.

The story begins on Easter evening, and when it opens Thomas is nowhere to be found. The disciples have locked themselves in the upper room, the same place they celebrated the Last Supper with Jesus just 3 days prior. And they've locked themselves in that room because they're afraid. *Even though Peter and the beloved disciple saw the empty tomb, and heard Mary Magdalene proclaim that Christ is risen, they're still afraid.* And what scares them? Well, John tells us it's "The fear of the Jews."

Now Ava, I need to be honest that I find this quite offensive. And most theologians and preachers have gone to great lengths to minimize the antisemitism of John's gospel. So it's important to let you know, and to let everyone else know, that mention of "the Jews" really means "the Jewish authorities who collaborated with the Romans." Not all Jews, just certain Jews.

But this is still an odd thing for John to write. He could have said "Pilate's men" or "the Roman soldiers." But he didn't. And it's especially an odd thing for John to write when you consider the fact that all the disciples locked in the room were themselves Jews. Which begs the questions: were they afraid of their own people? Or were they afraid of themselves?

And the answer could be . . . maybe. The execution, the missing body, the empty tomb, the shocking message of Mary. Maybe they couldn't face it, so they fled and locked themselves behind those closed doors because they were afraid of their neighbors, themselves, their power, or their future. Which means when you really think about it, the disciples entombed themselves. Even after two of them saw the empty tomb and heard the news that Christ had risen, they essentially put themselves in a tomb and shut and locked the door behind them.

Now I was thinking about that imagery this week when Brent and I were talking about the solar eclipse, and how he was reminded when watching it of what someone said to him years ago about being locked in a dark room, which I imagine the upper room was. After all, they didn't have any electricity and it was night time, so odds are good the room was dark. Which means that when they shut the door the room got even darker, and the only way to let light in was to open the door. It's so obvious but also sort of an epiphany. In order for light to come in we have to open the door, no matter how scared we are of what's on the other side. Which means that just at the edge of darkness, at the edge of our fear, is light. But we can only get to the light by opening the door.

Now sometimes doors are literal, like in our story. But sometimes doors are metaphorical, which they also could have been in our story. Because let's be honest, John's gospel has lots of figurative speech. So I think John was also trying to tell us that we have to be willing to open the door to the unknown in order for light to come in and overcome our fears. It's the only way.

But isn't this message that we've heard Jesus proclaim over and over again? Literally since the beginning?

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. (John wrote in chapter 1, verse 1) ² He was in the beginning with God. ³ All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being ⁴ in him was life,^[a] and the life was the light of all people. ⁵ The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overtake it."

Elsewhere in John, Jesus said, "I am the door." And in Revelation, a book attributed to John, Jesus proclaimed, "Behold, I stand at the door and knock."

You see, Ava, just on the other side of our fears – on the other side of all those locked doors we really *don't* want to open, stands Jesus. He's right

there; there's even a little light under the threshold that reassures us of that.

But just in case we miss it, or our fears still get the best of us, Jesus finds a way in. Somehow, Jesus walks through a closed, locked door to get to us. Jesus meets us where we are; and comes to us wherever we might be. How he does it doesn't matter nearly as much as the symbolism of the act—and when Jesus gets to us he promises us peace. “Peace be with you,” he tells the disciples, and by extension, us.

You see, Jesus doesn't ask the disciples or us to conquer our fear on our own. He breathes on them the Holy Spirit, who he calls an Advocate, our Advocate, who will serve as Christ's presence even after he's gone, and will guide us in truth and guarantee our peace.

This is an important thing for you to remember, Ava, and for all of us to be reminded of. Because just like the disciples encountered hostility and trouble, you . . . we will and do, too. But we do not face it alone. Our Advocate is always with us. Which means we don't need to be afraid.

Ava, this past week we witnessed a solar eclipse. What an awe-inspiring thing to watch! What struck me in watching it — what I really noticed this time was how much darker it quickly got at the moment of full totality. Someone I was with joked prior to full totality that he didn't understand what all the fuss was about because it wasn't that dark. But when full totality hit, it was dark! Not nighttime sort of dark, but dark nonetheless. And we all took off our glasses, whooped and cheered and clapped, and stood there marveling up at the moon and the ring of the sun around it. Just remarkable.

But then the second it was over, we had to put our glasses back on again. Just a sliver from the sun was all it took for light to appear again.

Ava, as you go through your life, try to remember when things appear, (get) dark, that all it takes is a sliver of God's light to overcome the darkness, because the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness cannot, will not,

overtake it. So be not afraid, as the Bible loves to remind us. For God is with you, and will find a way to break through a locked door to get to you.

Ava, wherever you go, remember the grace of God and God's assurance that you belong to the God who created you. God gave us all the sacrament of baptism today so that we might all be strengthened and reminded of God's grace and presence in our lives.

Ava, may the Lord bless you and keep you, may the Lord be kind and gracious to you, and may the Lord look upon you with favor and bring you peace today and every day.

Amen.

A sermon delivered by Rev. Dr. Anne B. Epling, Pastor/Head of Staff of First Presbyterian Church, Fort Wayne, Indiana, on the occasion of Avalynn Renee Carlson's baptism, April 14, 2024.