

Matthew 3:13-17
Isaiah 42:5-9

St. John's Presbyterian Church
Devon, Pennsylvania
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Twenty-eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time

God-Bearer (for Ellie's Baptism)

I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and kept you;
I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind,
to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness. *Isaiah 42:6-7*

Ellie, folks are going to think I'm a little silly asking you, a ten month-old, this question, because they may not have noticed it themselves. Anyway, did you notice that when we read from Matthew's Gospel this morning it told how Jesus was baptized. Then, at your baptism, I read from Matthew the very last thing that Jesus said to his followers, "Go into all the world and make followers of me, baptizing them and teaching them everything about me. . . . And, remember," he said, "I am with you *always*." So, when your Mommy and Daddy brought you forward, you were surrounded with Jesus talking about baptism. Isn't that neat! Jesus obviously thinks that baptism, and our teaching about him and being taught are really important. Anyway, did you notice that you were surrounded with Jesus and baptism? You *did*! I always said you were a little genius. Let's see how many of your friends noticed. Not so many...!

Ellie, in your baptism a few minutes ago God asked me to ask your Mommy and Daddy what your *Christian name* is to be. Of course, I already know your name. Everyone here knows your name because it says in the bulletin "Ellie McKay." But that's not the point. We say your name at the moment of your baptism because Jesus wants to make your name a holy thing, something you wear proudly—a God-name. You are a Christian. Until God, who gives you your life, signs your name on your forehead where every one can see it, you have no real identity in the world. Now that you have a name from God, you are a child of God with Christ's name written upon you *for all the world* to see. As a very wise man named Socrates once said, "Speak so that I may *see* who you are."

There will come times in your life, Ellie, when you will be uncertain about who you are, and you'll wonder if your life has much meaning. That happens when you feel swept aside as others take the spotlight. There will be times when you study hard in school—or perhaps not so hard as you should have, because you have to choose between two hard choices, and then you got a poor grade. Then you will question your choices and feel badly about yourself. There will be times when you make a mistake, and other people will be hurt by your mistake. And because you can't fully repair what has been done, you will lose your sense of worth, for a time. These are painful times, as we all discover. But who you really are has very little to do with what you *feel* about yourself at any time. Who you *really* are is much more permanent than that: You are a child of God, Ellie—always.

God's spirit has always been the quickening of life within you. Because God never leaves you, you are a *God-bearer*, always a God-bearer. Never forget *whose* you are, because that is what makes you *who* you really are. Remember what God said long ago through his prophet Isaiah, what your friend Ellen Moeller read this morning: "I have taken you by the hand and kept you; I have given you as a promise to the people, a light to the nations" (Isaiah 42:6).

Already I've learned so much from you, Ellie. The first time I took you outside on my own was back in the early summer. It was a lovely day, and as we walked ever so slowly around the garden, you watched everything. You just drank in the whole world, the sound of birds chirping, sunlight on leaves, and the way petals changed shape as the soft breeze caught them; the big, big sky, the cars whizzing down the hill close by, the great canopy of green trees overhead. You got very still and quiet and focused with the wonder of it all. It was all so new and pretty and magical.

And then we sat together on that old swing in the front yard that I made seventeen years ago for your mommy and Aunt Katherine. I sang you a song. And on the third swing—just a gentle little swing—the rope broke and I fell on my behind and you fell ‘plop’ on top of me. I was so worried that you might be hurt, but you just got wide eyed, then gave a “Huh!” and you laughed. (We never did tell your Mommy and Daddy—but I guess they know now.) So after you’d gone back home to D.C., I made a new strong swing, wide enough for we adults to sit on, and have you on our lap. And I etched into the seat “Ellie and co.” (with a little “c” because you’re the very first).

Watching you that day made me think how much I take for granted in the world. Not like you. You see the wonder in everything. Which reminds me of something Douglas Hofstadter wrote (you won’t know of him yet, but I hope you will). He wrote about how time seems to speed up as we get older. He said, when we are very young, like you, Ellie, we take *everything* in because it’s all new—tastes and smells, and scary bangs, shapes and colors. And because we have to ponder all these new things, and store them carefully away, and because we see so much new stuff all the time, when we are young, time seems to go soooo sloooooowly! All your friends here can remember being a child, Ellie, and how awfully far away Jesus’ birthday always seemed, with its presents on Christmas morning. It seemed like it would *never* come! Then the older we got the fewer things were new, and time seems to go by quicker and quicker.

Now, if we could just hang onto that wonderful sense of newness and curiosity that you have, how much more fun and rich and interesting life would be, like taking a walk down a road that we usually drive along—we see so much more. Just the other day I took the train back from Bryn Mawr, and I decided to walk home from the train station. Well right at the junction of Devon State and Conestoga there’s a big old house, and as I walked by I saw all these hens in the yard, and one big old rooster strutting around. I must pass that house eight times a day—but I’ve *never* noticed hens there before—on the Philadelphia Mainline, of all places!

When I hold you and watch you watching the world, I can’t help thinking that you’re saying in your heart, “Wow, this is so cool, God. Thank you for showing me this new thing that I never knew before.” Wonder and “thank you” is what we call worship. And Ellie, you showed me it can happen anywhere, anytime.

Your very special friend, Jesus, watched the world a lot, quietly, the way you do when you play. Then, when Jesus had really thought about what he’d seen, he’d tell us stories that showed how he saw God in everything, just the way I sense you do in your happy curiosity. Jesus would tell stories about a tiny mustard seed that would grow so big that even the birds of the air would build their homes among its branches and its protective leaves. He would tell how just one tiny wheat seed could make so many—even a hundred. How each good shepherd knew the names of all the sheep, the way God knows your name and mine, Ellie. He told a story about a daddy who really missed his son, who’d gone a long way away, then how glad he was when his son changed his ways and came home. He’d tell about the colors in the morning and the evening sky, and the wise things those colors helped us discover about God. Jesus saw the good that ordinary people did unexpectedly, and how, when we are kind and good to each other, we show people what God is like. We *wear God* in such moments as God-bearers. That’s you, Ellie, and me and everyone.

I hope you always see and feel that in yourself. I don’t want you ever to lose that feeling of being a God-bearer. I hope the world and the church doesn’t ever get so busy with other things and other choices that it forgets to help you be a God-bearer in the world. That would be a very, very sad thing, if it did.

I said you have already taught me many things. Here are two more:

You have a wonderful capacity for laughter. You can be happy with a butterfly landing on your head, when your Mommy took you to the butterfly farm.

There hasn’t been much happiness in the world the last few weeks, except among you and your children friends. And when you laugh and smile at the silly things your Daddy does when you play, you remind me of something Jesus said: “Why are you anxious . . .?” Doesn’t God feed all the birds of the air, and make the flowers grow, said Jesus? And if God can do all that for them, how much more will God take care of us, if we ask. You teach me that.

And this. Last night, after midnight, you were in a *lot* of pain, we think from an ear infection. The pain would get hold of your whole body and make you shake, it hurt so much. It made us all hurt so badly for you. Yet in an instant you turned again to laughter as the pain subsided, as if to make us feel better, before another excruciating pain would wrack your little frame again. You chose to be happy in those moments when you

could. And that is something we too easily forget. We, too, can choose how we are going to be to the world in any moment.

It's things like these that make you a God-bearer, Ellie. Sometimes I think you know more innately about God, and feel more of Jesus than we have forgotten. Thank you for being our teacher—about grace, and unconditional love and trust, and for loving us with the love of God.

I love you very much, Ellie. Your whole big family does. And what is hard for all of us to imagine is that Jesus loves us even more than you do.

“Happy baptism day,” Ellie, from all your new family and friends.

Amen.