



FIRST CONGREGATIONAL  
CHURCH UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST  
— Stockbridge, Massachusetts —

## *Real Sacraments for Real Life*

**May 5, 2019**

**Scripture: Isaiah 43:1-4a**

But now thus says the LORD, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. <sup>2</sup>When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. <sup>3</sup>For I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior. I give Egypt as your ransom, Ethiopia and Seba in exchange for you. <sup>4</sup>Because you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you.

**Sermon:**

The movie, “The Memphis Belle,” takes a compelling story and then weaves story after story after story on top of it.

The Memphis Belle was a B-17 bomber in World War II. Crews of that bomber numbered between 6 and 10, and if a crew could survive 25 missions, they would be done. They would go home. They would have made it. And this movie takes that story of this particular bomber on its 25<sup>th</sup> mission, and it weaves a story on top of it. One more mission to go and they get to go home. And yet nothing on that mission goes in any way that they had planned for or imagined. Fighters run out of gas due to a storm. They themselves take great enemy fire. They lose their own gas on the way home. And yet they manage to make it across the English Channel and they are so close to being home. When all of a sudden, a final detail hits home.

Their landing gear, it will not go down. Bad enough for a bumpy landing in a plane that’s already been riddled with bullets. There is a belly turret on that plane, and so whoever is in that belly turret is not going to survive such a landing. And when you watch this movie, there is a moment on all of their faces when despite everything they’ve been through, despite how close they are to finally making it home, there is that momentary glimpse of giving up. Wondering it’s just not going to work, they’re tempted so close to the end to give up or give in. The landing gear won’t go down.

Perhaps not as dramatically, perhaps not as portrayed on a screen, we've all been there, right? We've all had those moments where we were facing something we were so close to finishing, and yet we get overwhelmed and are tempted in those final moments to simply give up and give in.

The story in Isaiah was told to the people of Israel who are precisely in that space. In this point of the prophet Isaiah, the people of Israel have been exiled from their homes, they have been separated from their families, they have watched as their holy city has burned, they have been away for generations. It has been so long since they have been home that many of the people have never known Jerusalem at all. There is widespread questioning about whether this whole endeavor, this whole faith, this whole walk with God is worth it, or whether we should just give up and give in, and move on.

And then come these stunning words. Isaiah 40 starts with "Comfort, o comfort my people." Hang in there, God says, for you will make it. Hang in there for the journey, it is not yet done. At the centerpiece of this passage are the three most important words in the English language or any language. And I believe it's the only time in the entire Bible where those three words appear on the lips of God, Godself. What are the three most important words in the entire language? "I love you." And here in God's own voice, he says, "I know things are tough. But do not fear. Do not give up. Do not give in. For you are precious in my sight, and I love you." On display in this reading is God's defining and uncompromising love, that takes us wherever we are and relocates us to where we need to be. But what is so beautiful in my mind about this passage is that this passage does not claim that life is a stroll through the tulips. This passage inherently and concretely recognizes that life will have incredibly tough times to deal with. Sure, there was the mention of love, but that love was mentioned in the reality of the fact that the people will walk through raging rivers. That is part and parcel of life. People will in fact stand in places where it feels like they are being consumed by fire. But in this passage, God says you will not be swept away, you will not be consumed, for I love you. Hang in there, keep going, step by step, somehow moving forward toward that finish line.

What's more, though, about this passage is that it recognizes that God's love is poured out for, as Claus Westerman says, "a tiny, insignificant people on the fringes of nowhere." The theologian muses that this love is primarily poured out for those who are lost and wandering, for those who need to be found. And friends, that isn't just the people of Israel, that is each and every one of us, perhaps even each and every day.

Today is a rare day in the life of the church. We will partake of the two sacraments of our church, the two high holy callings of our church, the two things we do that we believe transcend who we are and send us to the beauty and mystery of God that is beyond us. We will baptize tiny little Gwendolyn, and we will do so making promises to her and her family. We will gather around this table and eat of this feast of grape juice and gluten-free bread. And we do it precisely in the midst of everyday life.

These are the great celebrations of the church. But they are not just cause for joy because we do them. They are cause for joy because they are set in the middle of our lives, in the middle of those raging rivers, in the middle of those consuming fires. They are meant, not so much to be a culmination, but rather sustenance, figuratively and metaphorically. They are meant to meet us where we are and to tell us: Do not give up, keep going, for I am not yet done with you.

The reason we are doing the baptism on this day, though, is because of the truth of that reality, that we don't just do things like this to be joyful, we do them in the midst of the fullness of life. In the back of your bulletin is a letter from Elizabeth and Ian. I invite you sometime today, not at this moment but sometime today, to make sure you read it. The reason this particular day was chosen is because today is International Bereaved Mothers Day. It is a day that was started by Carly Marie in Australia for the death of her son Christian. He had already passed away in her womb a few weeks before she delivered him. Carly wrote that the greatest fear is that people will forget about our children who we carried and loved, and yet were not born. Elizabeth and Ian, you see, picked out this day, because today is a day where they too are remembering for themselves International Bereaved Mothers Day. That Gwendolyn has two siblings who did not make it to this world, to this life, to these breaths. And so it is on this day that they want to baptize Gwendolyn in this joyous gathering, not forgetting those other two children, but in the fullest remembrance of them, that they might engage in that sacrament in the midst of the fullness of life. You know their story because they have written you a letter.

I was intrigued to learn that if you are walking around this week and you see a heart drawn on a woman's wrist or hand, that is the sign that she is participating in this week as well. And the founder of this movement says that you should go up and talk to her. You should go up and ask her about that heart. For in doing so, she will have the chance to tell you the story of that child, and then that greatest fear, that fear that paralyzes, that fear that doesn't keep us moving forward, that her child might be forgotten, will dissipate because she will have the chance to tell you about it. It is an invitation; take advantage of it.

Interestingly enough, though, Carly wrote this. She wrote that "I intend for this holiday to be a temporary one." To be a temporary movement, a heart-centered attempt at healing the official Mothers' Day for all mothers. She says "I believe we can do this, and sometime in the future there will no longer need to be a day for this, because all mothers on Mothers' Day will be recognized, loved, supported and celebrated." So today as we celebrate the baptism of Gwendolyn, we do so together with Elizabeth and Ian, mindful of the fullness of this story, and the fullness of the journey.

If you watch the end of “The Memphis Belle,” in addition to the landing gear not going down, the final engine runs out of gas on the way to the landing. But here’s what happens. They remember that in the plane there is a crank that you can crank down the landing gear. And so that team whips into action and the landing gear snaps into place the moment before the plane touches down. And in that moment, Jack, I think you would be most pleased, because in that moment there is a baritone voice of “Danny Boy,” singing out with a symphonic accompaniment, the greatest joy of life found.

You need to know this, these sacraments, like International Bereaved Mothers Day, they too are designed to be temporary. They too are designed to help us find the strength and memory, to hang in there until we all land on that runway in the great eternal realm of heaven. And where, no offense, Jack, but music even greater than “Danny Boy” will welcome us all home. Friends, when you participate in these sacraments today, and you will participate in both, bring the fullness of not just yourselves but the fullness of your lives, all those raging currents, all those firestorms that you are dealing with, so that together in this moment we can look each other in the eye, not succumb to fear, and instead keep moving forward step by step, until all will be well, and we will all be joined in love that never ends.



*The Rev. Brent Damrow, Pastor*