

A Year With Abbey

Little Abbey continues to attend every Sunday in church, third row center. Only occasionally is she taken out by the child care giver. Most of the time she is fully there – absorbing every word and note. At ten months she began trying out her new sounds and would occasionally compete for sermon time, but mostly she joined the congregational responses with the exception of a wonderful solo response. Upon hearing the priest proclaim with authority “The gifts of God for the people of God,” her newly learned “ga” sound was triggered and called forth. It was an echo response in perfect meter and tone as she attempted to repeat every word with a simple chirping sound of “ga..ga.. ga..ga.. ga..ga ga..ga.” This was followed by a stunned silence in which every head in the congregation turned to look at her in awe and wonder. Without a doubt everyone knew that she too was a gift of God for our gathered people of God.

At eleven months she continued to watch from her third row perch as the torch bearers walked reverently towards the pulpit with flickering lights. They graced the Gospel book as the sacred words were read and turned to walk back towards the altar. Little Abbey, an early walker, broke loose with her eyes fixed on the lights and toddled forth to follow as a faithful “child of the light.” She was scooped up in the arms of the grandfatherly priest and carried with the Gospel book up to the altar and quietly returned to her parents en route to preach the sermon, which stood pale beside the one just acted out.

By Good Shepherd Sunday Abbey was a full 13 months old having celebrated her first birthday on Maundy Thursday. She listened intently as the children and babes in arms gathered around during the meditation to hear the story of the Good Shepherd told with movable figures. Later she joined her parents as usual at the altar rail. But this Sunday was different. Did she hear the Good Shepherd call her name or did she recognize the chalice minister as the one who told the story of the Good Shepherd’s love for her? Or was she at just the right age when for the first time she leaned forward from her fathers arms, reached out with both hands and decidedly took the cup for her own. Surely she knew, in some deep mysterious way, who she was and whose she was and at whose table she had come to join.

It was the early Christmas Eve Service and young Abbey, now about 21 months old, sat astride the knees of her two visiting Godfathers. She had in her lap her favorite “soft sculpture” Crèche set with movable three dimensional fabric figures of Mary and Joseph and Baby Jesus in his manger. They were accompanied by two shepherds and their sheep – all with Velcro attachments. Everything had gone smoothly and quietly for Abbey until the 95-year-old Deacon stood with great dignity and authority reading the Gospel in her best, but decidedly quivery, soft spoken British accent. None the less, with great expression. The congregation was straining to hear and to give due respect to both the Gospel and this beloved holy woman who had served them faithfully over the years.

Perhaps Abbey thought this fragile voice needed a little extra volume and that she could serve as a kind of microphone – it’s hard to know. But out of her silence during the previous part of the service Abbey suddenly began an echo mumble in perfect rhythm and tone, putting in equal time as her two Godfathers continued to quietly shush her. I turned around to see what was going on and was nearly overcome as I saw her very intently moving the figures and attempting to

mumble the Gospel of the Birth of Christ right along with the Deacon. What a beautiful Christmas gift of “the child among us” she gave to all!

I began this story a year and half ago as an Advent Project writing on the theme of Incarnation. Perhaps its fitting that I should be completing it today on Easter Sunday. Abbey will celebrate her second birthday next week. I missed her last week as I was home sick with the flu. But Abbey was there and her mother told me of the strangest thing that she did last week.

As always, her family arrived early for church since her mother comes straight from her night duty at the hospital. Therefore Abbey is the first to arrive and thinks of church as her second home. She probably wonders what all those other folks are doing there when they begin to arrive. Apparently, about fifteen minutes before church started as others were coming in and being seated, Abbey wandered up to the altar area and very decidedly lay herself out prone facing the altar. She stayed there with her head on her arm not sleeping but awake in a kind of transfixed state for about five minutes.

I couldn't help but think of the ancient rite of prostration as one would do in making a life profession. I doubt that little Abbey had any conscious awareness of what she was doing. But it did seem a fitting act on this Palm Sunday morning when we would remember the children of Jerusalem laying their cloaks and palm branches out for their King Jesus to ride by.

Young children live in the metaphysical world of the mystics and are in tune with spiritual harmonies that the rest of us can barely hear. Who knows, perhaps in some deep intuitive way she had strewn her very self in the pathway her Master would ride as he made his way to the altar for this seasonal Paschal Feast.

Would that all children everywhere could feel so comfortable at the foot of the altar. It's the place of their “true” home and they know it. Let us not hinder the path – but name the Mystery, and walk with them on their journey homeward.

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