

Whispers of the Spirit
Anne Apple
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It was three days before our Betsy's seventeenth birthday; an ordinary cold and blustery gray day in Memphis; a January morning and the Lord's Day at Idlewild. The baptismal font holding forth stage right in the sanctuary was full to over-flowing; the polished and engraved silver bowl brimful and equipped for the eleven o'clock service.

One of the many inserts in the worship bulletin that morning was a hymn entitled *God of Futures Yet Unfolding*, with a text by Mary Louise Bringle. At the 8:30 service, in the chapel, I sang this song while I had the privilege of holding a young boy named Clarke on my left hip while his mother, Anne Bradley, stood at my right side, holding his brother Webb. We shared an insert and sang together to the tune of Abbot's Leigh.

God of futures yet unfolding, ever making all things new:
Grant us pathways in our wandering, light when darkness dims our view.
Open doors when dread defeats us. Set discouraged captives free.
God of futures yet unfolding, help our blinded eyes to see.

At the 8:30 service, with young Clarke on my hip and Bringle's words on my lips, my blinded eyes reflected back in time to Advent worship. During Advent, Clarke and Webb, and their Mom and Dad, sat with me on the back row of the chapel surrounded by their extended family. The boys noisily, repetitively and beautifully asked before the Lord's Supper, "Is it time for the bread, Mommy? Is it time for the bread, yet?" Anne Bradley responded quietly and gently, "Not quite boys – but soon, really soon."

Satisfied with their mother's response, they hesitated, looked at one another, then smiled big full smiles before re-entering their chorus of questions, "Is it time for the bread, Mommy? Is it time for the bread, yet?" Clarke and Webb are three years old. Together they are answered prayer and holy survivors of premature birth. They rushed into this world with their triplet brother who grievously did not survive to know this family's enduring love; or to sing hymns on the chapel's back row or to ask Anne Bradley on Sunday mornings, "Is it time for bread yet, Mommy?"

During the 8:30 service on this ordinary January day as Clarke looked up at me smiling, I knew the Spirit. Clarke illumined the way, not yet a reading, but singing and humming a melody about God – a God of futures yet unfolded.

Clarke's joyful childlike voice singing in my ear represented answered prayers and unleashed hope as together we sang about resurrection splendor that burns away the haze of fear. Early this morning in song I had a sense of something extraordinary. When I came into the sanctuary for the 11:00 service I witnessed a child named Gracie who had come to the waters for baptism.

Gracie was in constant motion in worship. Sitting with and crawling over her mother, she played with the papers in the pew, like a curious puppy sniffing and moving. She explored every edge and crevice of God's house; her movement as constant as her mother's smile.

After the confession of sin and the moment with the children Suzanne carried a wiggling and resisting Gracie before the font. Young children and their parents filled the area around the font to participate and watch over her baptism. Offering envelopes, prayer cards and hymn inserts were volunteered as vehicles of distraction to Gracie yet she quickly discarded them.

Pastor Steve turned and asked “Suzanne, putting your whole trust in the grace, mercy and love of Jesus Christ, do you desire to have Gracie baptized? Suzanne smiled at her wiggling, in-motion daughter; rested her on the font, sighed and responded with exasperation and hope, “Yes – please!” He continued with another question. “Do you renounce the evil powers of this world which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God?” Suzanne nodded, “Yes.” Then, as he moved in with the waters of baptism, Gracie went motionless in her mother’s arms – nestling her head into her mother’s neck – resting serene, receiving completely; I witnessed an extraordinary and holy moment. And Steve proclaimed, “See what love God has given us that we might be called children of God, and so we are.” Then we stood and sang,

God of every fresh creation, tend us with a gardener’s hand.
On your people pour your Spirit, water on a thirsty land:
‘Till we spring like grassy meadows, poplar trees by flowing streams.
God of every fresh creation, reawaken Eden’s dreams.

From the chapel with Clarke to the sanctuary with Gracie – God’s children led the way that day reminding me of God’s good mercy and steadfast love - freely offered and freely shared; a reawakening of Eden’s dream. Like a mother, God met me that morning as I remembered a child asking about the bread of life as we sang about resurrection splendor. Like a mother, God met me that morning in the fidgety movement of a child held up against the irony of her peaceful stillness brought on by baptism. Like a mother, God invited me into the absolute beauty of worship, in song, prayer, and even in the chaos of distraction. It was three days before our Betsy’s seventeenth birthday; it was an ordinary cold and blustery gray day in Memphis; it was the Lord’s Day.

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