

“The Consolation of Love”
May 19, 2019

Philippians 2:1-11

Having lived and pastored here in the town of South Windsor for more than twenty years, it’s uncommon these days when I am asked to do a funeral for someone who is a complete stranger to me. Most often, I’m leading a funeral for someone in this congregation or someone connected to this congregation. And sometimes I’m doing a funeral for a family that knows me because I have buried one of their loved ones in the past or they have attended a funeral or a Sunday service where they have seen me in my role.

Back in the beginning of April, however, I got a call from Samsel and Carmon about leading a funeral for a baby girl. And when I agreed to do the service, I was given some basic information on the phone. The baby girl’s mother, Stephanie, was from Barbados and she was cleared by her doctor to fly to Connecticut to visit her sister who lives in this area.

The plane flight from Barbados was relatively uneventful, but not long after Stephanie arrived in Connecticut, she went into labor. And it was clear that her baby girl, after eight months in her mother’s womb, was not going to wait to be born. Unfortunately, not long after Stephanie birthed her daughter into the world, the baby girl died.

Even with limited information to go by, I knew leading this funeral service would be emotionally trying. Still, I wanted to touch base with Stephanie before putting the service together. So the next afternoon, I set out for the funeral home hoping I’d be able to meet Stephanie and talk with her a bit.

A short time later, Stephanie arrived at the funeral home with her sister, her mother, and her father-in-law. Meanwhile, Stephanie’s husband was back in Barbados, unable to afford a plane ticket and unable to obtain a last minute visa to travel to the United States.

After Stephanie and her family members spent some time with the baby, whom Stephanie and her husband named “Isabella,” meaning “devoted to God,” I asked if I could accompany the four of them into the funeral parlor to see Isabella myself. And the five of us walked into the room and over to Isabella’s casket.

Isabella’s casket was powder blue, not much bigger than a large shoebox. And inside the casket, Isabella, with smooth, dark brown skin and beautiful, angelic facial features, wore a white dress with a white ribbon around her tiny head. She looked peaceful and precious, the way infants often do when they are fast asleep.

Knowing this would be the last time they would see her face to face, one by one, Stephanie, her sister, her mother, and her father-in-law took turns saying good-bye to Isabella. In one of the holiest and most heartbreaking moments, Stephanie’s husband offered his own good-bye from Barbados as he “Face Timed” his infant daughter over the phone. Each good-bye

in that room was punctuated with a new set of tears. And each family member made a point to reach out and comfort Stephanie in their own gentle and compassionate way.

I'm not sure how long I was in the funeral parlor that afternoon, but eventually Stephanie and her family finished saying good-bye to Isabella. And Stephanie asked if I could spend some time with her alone. We sat down together in a nearby room and Stephanie told me her story.

After two recent miscarriages and the loss and sadness that accompanied those miscarriages, Stephanie described how much she and her husband were looking forward to welcoming their first baby into the world. With so many accumulated hopes and dreams pinned on Isabella's birth, the depth of pain and loss was etched on Stephanie's face.

During the course of our conversation, Stephanie looked at me and asked me the kind of question people of faith have been asking for generations. "How could God let this happen?" And I struggled to find a good answer. Except to assure her that the same God who loved Isabella during her short lifetime here on earth was the God who promised to love her now and always in God's heaven. The very same God, I assured her, who promised to love Stephanie and her husband through the pain and the emptiness that lay ahead.

Then Stephanie recounted for me the night Isabella was born. How Isabella was born after long hours of labor at 10:30pm. And how she died at midnight, an hour and a half later. Having gone through several sleepless nights in a row, followed by hard labor, Stephanie was exhausted. Meanwhile, as soon as Isabella was born, doctors and nurses took Isabella away and worked hard to keep her alive. Stephanie tried hard to stay awake, excited to see her newborn daughter. She waited patiently and expectantly until the doctor came into the room and shared with Stephanie the heartrending news.

Shortly after midnight, the nurse on duty brought Isabella in to be with Stephanie. And she left the two of them alone in the room, a weeping mother and her motionless baby girl, far away from Stephanie's husband, far away from Stephanie's Barbados homeland, far away from the birth night Stephanie envisioned.

As she fell in and out of sleep in those post-midnight hours, Stephanie told me about the waking minutes when she held Isabella close to her chest. Then Stephanie paused for a moment in her story. And she told me that what she would say next was something she was not ashamed to admit.

"There was a moment," Stephanie continued, "where I held Isabella close to my breast and tried to nurse her..."

That image was so raw, so vulnerable, so fragile, so overwhelmingly sad, that I almost gasped when Stephanie shared it. For me, it felt as if all the oxygen had suddenly been pulled out of the room where the two of us were sitting. And I sat there with Stephanie quietly, trying to live into what I had just heard. Not because it was morbid or shameful, but rather because it struck me as an intensely desperate, intensely tender and poignant, intensely human instinct. A

mother so in love, so hoping against all hope, and so totally overcome with grief that she tried to suckle her infant daughter back to life.

I will not forget sitting in that holy space where God made Godself known in silence that needed no words...

As you can tell from this sermon, in the weeks since my conversation with Stephanie and the funeral that I led for Isabella the next morning, I have thought about our time together often. I thought about Stephanie this past Sunday, wondering what Mother's Day was like for her back in Barbados. Now that she is home and reunited with her husband, has she found any way to begin to heal the empty space in her heart and in her life? I hope and pray she has.

And I've thought about Isabella often as well. On this day when we baptize Wyatt and Abby and recognize God's gift of new life accompanied by so many hopes and dreams, I'm reminded of Isabella's brief lifetime. Recognizing how beautiful and fragile and precious and vulnerable life actually is.

And I think about Wapping Community Church. Not because you were physically there with me in the funeral home that day. But rather because you accompanied me in spirit, as you do throughout my ministry. And because this congregation takes seriously the fact that we are a community church. We are a group of faithful people who believe in sharing the great love of Jesus Christ not only with one another but with the community of people beyond these church walls. Especially those who are in need of comfort and healing and encouragement and assistance.

I say to all of you this morning with deep and abiding gratitude that the love we share in this Wapping community of faith now extends all the way to Barbados.

And finally, I think about Jesus Christ and go back to God's words to find strength and inspiration, comfort and reassurance for the amazing ministry you and I are called to do in Christ's name:

"If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus."

Let the same mind be in you and me that was in Christ Jesus. Amen.