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Ordination

Laura Bender

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In 1986, I kneeled before a United Methodist bishop to be ordained as a deacon. Three years later, after successfully completing a probationary period, the same bishop ordained me as an elder. In both formal services, in front of God, friends, family, hundreds of clergy, and two thousand Methodists representing 565 churches in the New York metropolitan area, he placed his hands on my head.

“Take thou authority as a deacon in the Church to preach the Word of God, and to serve all God’s people,” he said during the first ceremony.

“Take thou authority as an elder in the Church to preach the Word of God, and to administer the Holy Sacraments,” he said during the second.

Turns out, these formal ceremonies had nothing to do with my ordination.

Midway through the second day of the retreat for new deacons, I received a call from the senior pastor. He told me a twenty-five-year-old parishioner, pregnant with twins, had developed complications and would soon lose her babies. He wanted me to drive two hours north to Albany Hospital to provide pastoral support.

I hesitated. “This is a serious issue that warrants the experience of the senior pastor.”

“This is a woman’s issue, and you are the woman on staff.”

“But you’re a father. You would be better able to help than childless me.”

“I’m the senior pastor who makes the decisions.”

I drove north, ruminating on my twenty-six-year-old inadequacies and inexperience. I had never witnessed a birth or a death. I had not baptized a baby nor conducted a funeral. Although much of what I had learned in seminary had been interesting, even as I studied, I knew it would be irrelevant. What had three years of Koine Greek taught me I could use in this

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situation? Even the lame case studies acted out by uncomfortable seminarians for our mutual edification had given me no insight. The senior pastor, the real pastor, should be making this call.

At the hospital, in the stark waiting area next to the delivery room, I found the twins' grandparents and two other couples from the church.

I asked the grandfather stood to greet me. "Any word from the doctor?"

"The foot of one of the boys broke through her cervix and caused an infection. If they don't induce labor, all three will die from sepsis. If they do ..."

His wife finished the sentence, "We'll still have a daughter."

"Is your son-in-law here?"

"Brian's in the delivery room with Kim."

I asked the two other couples to join us in a circle. I led them in prayer. At least this was something useful I knew how to do. Then we took seats to wait. Hours passed. We fidgeted. Reading a magazine felt disrespectful. Conversation seemed awkward. I fetched coffee for everyone. Twice.

After midnight, the delivery room door opened. The neonatal physician called into the waiting room. "Which one of you is the pastor?" Timidly, I raised my hand.

"Come in. She's about to give birth to the second one." As I entered, he turned to me. On his palm lay a baby twenty-five weeks from conception. "I don't know what you want to do with this." He handed the child to me, then leaned in close. "This one is dying and the other will, too."

As he spoke, Kim looked toward us. I smiled, hoping my face would not expose the words I had just heard.

I held the baby out for her to see. His head lay on my fingertips; his feet extended only to my wrist. Kim managed a quick smile, then returned to birthing her second son.

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Everyone in the room was busy but the tiny boy and me.

I said silently, “You will not be here long enough to experience the joys of this world. Right now, outside this place, twinkling stars dot the night sky. In a few hours the sun will rise and fill the land with color: majestic dark green pines, maples shimmering red and gold, oaks turning orange against the pale blue sky wafted with fluffy white clouds. Nearby, cool mountain streams tumble over rocks, furry bunnies scamper and crisp apples hang from branches, waiting to be enjoyed.” I told him about ice cream and cake and how delightful to eat it, surrounded by family and friends, especially when there is something to celebrate. I said he had arrived in this world because of love, and although he would be with us only a few minutes, he would never be forgotten. I told him Jesus loved him. He would soon see Him face to face. I continued to hold the tiny baby and smile, though everyone else—his parents, the nurses, even the doctor—were fighting back tears.

After the second child was born, and Kim made ready, a nurse wheeled her across the hall where family, friends and the delivery room staff had gathered for the baptism. Brian stood near his wife, and the nurse placed the boys in their open hands.

I pulled my new *Book of Worship, Pocket Addition* from my purse and searched for the right page. “Dearly beloved, baptism is an outward and visible sign of the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, through which grace we become partakers of his righteousness and heirs of life eternal ...”

By the time the sacrament was complete, the babies were dead.

During the long drive home in the early light, I had time to reflect. How had I remained composed, dry-eyed and able to focus despite my inexperience? I had arrived at the hospital scared, longing to be rescued by a real pastor. Then, seeing the family in distress, I did what they

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needed. How was that possible? Then the answer came: At the moment God required the presence and service of a pastor, God ordained me.

20 March 2003. The invasion of Iraq.

“Bunker. Bunker. BUNKER.” The word got louder as the corpsman approached.

“What does that mean?” I asked a nurse with whom I shared a tent in Kuwait. Before she answered, a chief corpsman ran by us.

“MOPP gear, shelter, incoming missile, run.” He motioned for us to catch up to him.

We grabbed the gear we were not already wearing and took off for the sandbagged wooden shelter dug next to the berm 100 feet away. In the dark, I slid down the steep sand slope and landed on my butt.

“Get inside. Gear on. Now.”

I pulled the gas mask out of the case attached to my left thigh. I held it against my face, blew out the dust, and sucked in to create a tight seal. I took off my helmet, drew the mask straps over my head, and pulled until it held firmly. Once I could breathe, I replaced the helmet. Then I took the charcoal-lined suit out of its bag and put it on over my uniform and flak jacket. After securing the coat and pants, I stuck each combat-booted foot into a floppy rubber galosh and finished the ensemble with a pair of gloves. Around me the shuffling diminished, then stopped as others completed donning their gear.

In pregnant silence we awaited our fate. Startled grunts accompanied the sound of the SCUD making an impact in the distance. I closed my eyes. “O God, may it have landed on nothing but empty desert. And please, please, may it not set off our sensors.” The instant death of a direct hit paled in comparison to exposure to chemical and biological agents.

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We waited in silence. With all our gear, there could be no words of comfort, no reassuring smiles, no feigned bravado or stupid comments.

Near me, someone began to shake. It started as a barely audible quiver that intensified as I moved closer. I switched on my red lens flashlight. I barely made out the young marine standing in front of me. New to the corps, this was his first deployment. I remembered a conversation about his sweetie back home. She was still in high school. His shaking grew worse as he hyperventilated in his mask. I touched his arm, but his panic only increased. I put the red glowing lens against the glass in my mask and stuck my face in front of his. Then I switched off the light, stepped up to him, and put my arms around him in the darkness. Reaching up, I leaned his head on my shoulder and patted his back like a momma pats her baby. Eventually his shaking stopped and he breathed as normally as one can in a gas mask. By the time the “All Clear” was called, he’d returned to himself. We both wandered into the night without saying a word.

Back at the tent, I could not sleep. I must have been out of my mind to think I should be here. What could I do to help these people? If a marine is panicked by our situation, how am I going to keep my head on straight? Our unit, Bravo Surgical Company, was in Kuwait waiting to be called forward to provide near-front-line care in a field hospital. How would I be able to do what they would soon ask of me? I was scared, too. These people needed a chaplain, and theirs was quaking in her combat boots.

At sunrise, I joined our tired bunker party for muster, then headed to the chow hall. With nothing to do all day but wait for the next inbound missile, we lingered over coffee.

“Bunker. Bunker. Bunker.”

“Do any of you hear that? It sounds like someone is yelling ‘bunker’ again. That isn’t funny.” I took a sip of the brown liquid swill in my cup.

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“Bunker. Bunker. Bunker.” The voice grew louder.

“Oh shit! Run!” an anesthesiologist called as she raced toward the open tent flaps.

White plastic chairs flew every-which-way as we made for the exit. En route to my assigned fortified hole-in-the-ground, I ran into my tent to grab my MOP suit and boots. An envelope lay next to them on the cot. I took it, too. Once in the bunker, I donned my gear and waited. At least now we could see.

Thud. Closer than last time. Talc-like sand fluttered from the wooden ceiling. While I waited on the sensors, I noticed the envelope sticking out of my charcoal jacket pocket. I must have stashed it there as I dressed. Curious, I held it in front of my gas mask.

A letter. A genuine letter. Had our camp’s postal system finally started working? Until now we could not get mail in or out. Our camp’s address had changed three times.

The cancelation mark said, “Poughkeepsie, NY.” The return address told me it had come from the grandparents of the twins. We had not seen each other in over a decade. How did they know I was in the navy, serving with marines in the Middle East, and how had they found my address?

I slipped off one glove to open the flap. Inside I found a note and a photo of two older teens I did not recognize. Tears filled my eyes as I read the letter over and over.

In it the couple said they felt compelled to write when they learned I had deployed. They needed to remind me that no matter how scared I might be or how inadequate I might feel, they knew for certain I was not alone. They wanted to reassure me that God, who had given me the strength to help them when they lost their grandsons, would not fail or forsake me in whatever lay ahead. The couple ended by saying that if the twins had lived, the boys would have been almost old enough to be with me in Iraq, and assured me that, as I had cared for them, I would be

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able to care for the young people with me. As evidence of God's providence and grace, they enclosed with the letter a photograph of their grandchildren. I remembered then that after losing the twins, their daughter had been told she would not be able to have children, but there they were in the photo, smiling at me.

I know who wrote that letter. I also know who sent the message. The timing was impeccable. Just a few hours after admitting I didn't think myself capable of doing what I had been called to do, God sent a response in the words of a couple I had always admired for their strong faith.

I placed the letter and photo back in the envelope and stuffed it in my cargo pocket, where it stayed throughout our combat deployment. As we cared for the severely injured in our field hospital in very austere and frightening conditions, it served as my daily reminder. God was paying attention. He had ordained me for this work. As long as I showed up to do it, so would He.



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