



Six years ago, I baptized a young infant named, Lexi. And Lexi was the daughter of two die-hard, and I mean *die-hard* University of Michigan football fans. By that time in my service as pastor with the congregation, everyone knew pretty well where my allegiance lied with regards to college athletics. In the southwest corner of that state up north, I put out a scarlet and gray-colored flag every football and basketball game day, just in case anyone would forget as they drove by the parsonage. Except, things were about to take an interesting turn in our relatively friendly rivalry relationship.

Because, in the previous ten years, Michigan had only defeated Ohio State once on the football field. But in December of 2014, the Wolverines hired one of their former players in Jim Harbaugh to lead the school back to their glory days. Confidence was high amongst the maize and blue faithful throughout the state and beyond. After all, what made Harbaugh most famous from his time as a player was when he guaranteed a victory against that school in Columbus, and sure enough, he did exactly that. It's just...since he joined the coaching ranks in Ann Arbor, he is 0-5 against Ohio State. But that guarantee from almost 20 years ago remains in the back of their minds, with just enough hope to carry them through season after season after season.

I promise I did not bring any of this up the day of Lexi's baptism, as a way to almost lure her away for her college sports allegiance for the rest of her life, but there is something about a guarantee with the sacrament of baptism that many parents and grandparents, especially, absolutely crave. We envision the pouring of water and the oil on the forehead as a sure-fire way for that child to be taken care of for all eternity. Except when it came to Lexi's life going forward in the earthly realm, there were not many more promises beyond that that the church could make. No guarantee that she would turn out to be a die-hard Wolverine fan, or quite honestly, have any care about sports at all. No guarantee on whether or not she would attend worship a teenager. No guarantee about career choices, or the crowds she would hang out with after school, or even the assurance that there would never come a time when she flat-out disbelieved there was a god at all.

Lest we forget, it isn't just about the child on those baptism celebration days. The parents and godparents were expected to make promises, too: promises to take her to worship, to bring her to the Communion table, talk with her about prayer and the Bible, to nurture her faith, strengthening her relationship with God. Nevertheless, I do not know how well Lexi's die-hard Wolverine parents lived up to those promises for the long run, but what I do remember about Lexi was her reaction when she was brought forth to the altar rail the first Sunday after she was baptized, as her mother came up to receive Communion while holding Lexi in her arms for her daughter to receive a blessing.

Now, I must tell you that I don't know if it was because I had a different aura about me, being from that dreaded state of Ohio, but more than a few of the children who came up for a blessing were, let's say...more than a little stand-offish to allow my hand to touch their forehead. But with Lexi, I still remember the biggest smile taking over her entire face. I doubt I had anything to do with that. I'm not so sure she remembered me pouring water over her face, but that smile was a way of letting me know she was happy in that place, amongst her family in Christ. It was almost as if the church had already made her feel the ultimate guarantee from God: words that I believe are echoed from the prophet Isaiah we heard this morning, that were meant to be a blessed reassurance for a people thousands of years ago. But at that baptism, God guaranteed to Lexi, her parents, her godparents, the entire family in Christ: Lexi, I am your first, I am your last, I am your everything in between. No matter the choices you make, no matter the career you take, no matter the ones you befriend; I am yours, no matter what.

I wonder if that is part of our calling as the church, to remind each other of the only guarantee that truly matters. To make it so real not just in terms of some distant heavenly realm that we so often obsess over in baptism, but right here, right now. To make us feel it to our core, so much so that all we can do is unleash a smile that we didn't even know we were capable of pulling off ourselves. I wonder if the church is meant to make children of God from all walks of life feel that most insistent, but compassionate, embrace of God, gripped with the promise of God to never ever let us go.

The church may not be able to guarantee much about how individual lives turn out, no matter how many baptisms or Communion celebrated, but we will guarantee that no matter what pandemic, no matter how much we may question where God is amidst all the topsy-turvy lives around us, this God is not only our first and our last, but absolutely everything in between: for Lexi, for all of us, no matter what. And for that Greatest News guaranteed for us, we most certainly give thanks to God, indeed! Amen!