

“The dignity of a proper burial, or a simple headstone to mark one’s final resting place, may seem like a small thing to most people in Western society. But not to Linda Znachko. In *He Knows Your Name*, Linda recounts the deeply moving stories of desperate, often disadvantaged, parents who—on face value—seem to have failed their offspring in death as well as in life. But the story is never that simple, as Linda so compassionately narrates. Her journey of serving ‘those who mourn’ began with a first step of obedience in providing a proper grave for an infant abandoned in a dumpster. Her mission has since grown to include an ever-widening circle of caring individuals dedicated to the proposition that our very humanity consists in our ability to do the ‘small things’ well—to love and respect the least among us, whether in life or in death.”

—CRISTÓBAL KRUSEN, chairman and CEO of Messenger Films, Inc.

“Linda Znachko could not have predicted how honoring one nameless, abandoned baby would lead to a vibrant celebration of life and love for otherwise rejected and forgotten people. By responding to God’s prompting time after time, Znachko models a life of faith and obedience. The stories in her book remind us there is always more than meets the eye—and by opening our hearts, we can reach out without judgment and watch God bring healing.”

—ANN KROEKER, writing coach and author of *The Contemplative Mom*,
Not So Fast, and *On Being a Writer*

“God’s Spirit was prompting me to step into a stranger’s deepest pain. Had I declined, no one around me would have been the wiser.’ This quote stood out to me perhaps more than any other in Linda Znachko’s anointed book, *He Knows Your Name*. Each of us has a choice to listen to the Lord’s promptings or to decline. And, wow, what a journey the Lord will lead us on if we follow him! With its compelling prose and jaw-dropping, real-life stories guaranteed to bend even the most cynical person at the knees, if this book doesn’t turn your ear toward what the Lord is doing and wants to do in the world, nothing will. Captivating,

unbelievable, mesmerizing, and deeply profound, this book is a must-read for anyone looking for a miracle, for hope, and above all, for life.”

—AMY K. SORRELLS, award-winning author of *Lead Me Home*
and other novels of hope

“Linda Znachko’s life calls all of us to care for ‘the least of these.’ She shares an incredible personal journey of giving love and dignity to those who have been passed by. It is not only a beautiful picture of Jesus’s love for each one of us, but it is a powerful life lived for the sake of others. Her inspiration and story should cause all of us to pause and once again say yes to God’s nudging of our heart to care for those who have no voice of their own.”

—JIMMY SEIBERT, president of AMI Global Ministries

HE KNOWS
Your
NAME

HOW ONE
ABANDONED BABY
INSPIRED ME TO SAY
YES TO GOD

LINDA ZNACHKO
with MARGOT STARBUCK

He Knows Your Name: How One Abandoned Baby Inspired Me to Say Yes to God
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To Steven.

*Your generosity and sweet love have been the wind
beneath my wings. Being your bride is my joy.*

To my precious children,

*Lauren, Andrew, Anna, and Caroline.
When I birthed you, you gave me life.*

For your beautiful name, Jesus.

I humbly lay this all down at your feet.



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INTRODUCTION

I have enjoyed a privileged life.

I was raised in a loving family and now have one of my own: an adoring husband, four children, two of whom are married, and I am over the moon enjoying my first grandchild. My husband runs a successful business. We live in a beautiful home, we have been to some of the most exotic places in the world, and we can afford to send our kids to college.

Privilege, though, doesn't exempt anyone from the bumps and bruises of life. The difficulties each of us face know no boundaries of geography, race, age, or income. Whether it's the loss of a child, the end of a marriage, chronic health issues, the death of a dream—pain comes to us all.

This story is born out of one of those painful seasons. My mother was facing terminal cancer and my daughter was battling the uncertainty of debilitating disease. My husband and I were forced to leave our precious daughter at a treatment center a thousand miles from our home, begging God that this painful decision would somehow save our daughter's life. The agony of the impending loss of my mother and the possible loss of my daughter crushed me. When we left the facility and stopped for gas, I began screaming hysterically, swearing at my husband, accusing him, and demanding, "We have to go back! We can't leave our daughter!" Steve, with tears running down his cheeks, chest heaving, grabbed me and held me tight as we stood in the pouring rain. Unable to move,

we gripped each other so we would not fall. We had come completely undone.

In that most difficult season, when I felt torn daily between being at my mother's bedside and being where I could best support my daughter, all I wanted to do was to erect boundaries, hide behind barriers, hunker down, and fight for the life of my child and for my family. But God had a very different plan. Not only would God deny me permission to set up new boundaries, he was about to tear down *all* my existing ones.

After my mother died and my daughter returned to a normal school routine, an unlikely journey with God began when I learned about a baby whose body had been found in an urban dumpster. The naive, hesitant yes I offered to God's prompting that day would launch the most unlikely journey. How could I ever have imagined that, at the moment I wanted to run from my own pain, God would heal me by sending me to help carry the pain of others? How could I have known that life's meaning would be revealed so vividly in places of death? The assurance that "God's ways are not our ways" took on unexpected meaning and, ultimately, it was *his* way, not mine, that brought me back to life.

My natural impulse was to avoid suffering. To push away pain. To dodge death. I shied away from what was uncomfortable. Awkward. Unpredictable. I wanted comfort and I sought that comfort in all kinds of ways: I read the latest Christian best sellers, I was active in several Bible studies, I attended women's conferences, I planned family vacations—but those distractions could not keep my pain and sadness at bay.

As I accepted Jesus's invitation to go where he was leading, I experienced my own comfort among those who suffer: the grieving widow, the childless parent, the abandoned spouse, the suffering survivor. When I followed Jesus, often with uncertainty, he led me into the sacred place of suffering where I found the strength and comfort I was looking for. It's where I found new life. And though I still don't presume to know what God is up to, I can say for certain that every time I have squeaked out another hesitant yes, God has led the way and God's presence has been enough.

Because human suffering is *where he is*, as God binds up the wounds of the brokenhearted (Psalm 147:3), it's also the surprising place at which

I encountered grace and was transformed. It's where God continues to meet me today, and I'm convinced that—however suffering touches your life or the lives of those around you—it's where God longs to meet you.

—Linda Znachko



CHAPTER 1

“Baby Found in Dumpster”

“Breaking News: Baby Found in Dumpster.”
I sat dumbfounded in front of my computer, struggling to make sense of the words scrolling across the online news site. I’d just come inside from the crisp October chill and shuddered at the thought of a child having been abandoned to the elements to die.

“Baby Doe wearing only a diaper.”

The words seemed like nonsense, and I was unable to process them. Other words settled into my heart:

Doe is not a name.

A dumpster is not a grave.

A diaper is not burial clothing.

The video accompanying the news story showed police investigating the industrial dumpster where a couple, searching for scrap metal, had found a baby’s body earlier in the day. The masks worn by the gloved professionals weren’t enough to disguise the sadness on their faces. A twisting blue light flashed above a squad car. Yellow caution tape stretched across the downtown parking lot, keeping curious onlookers from getting in the way.

What I was feeling, however, was far more than curiosity. As my heart began to quicken I recognized the nudge of the Holy Spirit, prompting me to act. God had been training me for years to follow in faith by taking one small step at a time. Although I could never predict what God had in store, I knew God was now inviting me to say yes to the Spirit's unlikely leading.

Quickly scanning for the byline, I called the *Indianapolis Star* and asked for the journalist who'd reported the story: John Touhy. Perhaps he'd be able to answer my questions.

When he picked up the call, I introduced myself and asked for his help.

"So, what happens to this baby?" I pressed.

In a gravelly voice, he patiently explained that the investigation was now a legal matter.

"The only one who can answer your questions," he explained, "is the coroner. I'm waiting to hear back from her office right now—Chief Deputy Ballew."

"I'll try her. Thank you so much for your help," I said before hanging up.

Knowing city offices had closed for the night, I would call the next day.

BEDTIME MUSINGS

After I had spoken to John Touhy, I explained my strange attachment to this child to my husband, Steve. Though neither one of us could have predicted the absurd unfolding of the day's events, Steve had always been the person in my life who was more afraid of saying no to God than of agreeing to even the most complicated or unwieldy yes. So, although we had no idea how this child would continue to impact our lives, Steve was quick to lend his support and encouragement.

When I climbed into bed that night, slipping between smooth satin sheets, thoughts of the precious little one continued to pulse through my heart and mind. The words that had so gripped me when I read the jarring news headline still rang in my ears: *A dumpster is not a grave.*

Grabbing my thick, blue, spiral-bound journal from my nightstand, I scribbled down the facts, writing what I knew as if to try to understand what I did not.

No name.

No funeral.

No burial clothes.

No songs.

No readings.

No blessing to acknowledge that this child *did* live.

As precious memories from my mother’s funeral, just four months earlier, flooded my mind, I felt as though I was reeling in some alternate universe. The gruesome end of this child’s earthly days suggested that he or she had never lived. But, I insisted to myself, this child *had* lived. If only growing inside a mother’s womb. This baby *lived*.

Pressing pen to paper, I continued to process:

A child of God was left to die in a dumpster. He or she was found early Wednesday morning by a couple looking for scrap metal. Looking for scrap, they found the remains of a baby. Buried in a trash heap.

Life and death had been close to my heart over the course of the year. My daughter’s fragile health hung in the balance. At that moment, we didn’t yet know if she would live. And although cancer had ravaged my mother’s body, it had not stolen her dignity. I continued to contrast the lavish funeral she’d received, honoring the inestimable value of her life, with the crude treatment of this precious little one.

“This baby needs a name,” I wrote. “God already knows it because it is, after all, written in the book of life. We just don’t know it yet. But he or she has one, and deserves one.”

FURTHER DIGGING

The next morning, I waited until just after nine to call the Marion County Coroner’s Office. An administrative assistant fielded some of my questions.

“The body will be disposed of after the case is closed,” she explained. Her language shocked me. Garbage is disposed of. Babies are not.

“What does ‘disposed of’ mean?” I asked, trying to quell in my voice the rage and sadness I felt inside.

“It means a pauper’s grave . . . a mass grave,” she told me.

A jolt of indignation shot through my body. *What?*

Now my head was spinning.

In 2009? I’d never imagined such a thing existed right where I live.

I silently vowed, *No way. Not if I can do anything about it.*

The receptionist told me I’d need to call back later to reach the corner. So I called throughout the morning until I was able to speak to Chief Deputy Ballew. I explained my intentions, that I was interested in giving the baby a proper burial. She confessed that she’d never received a call like mine before.

“I’d like to be granted the legal *right* to the child,” I pressed.

“Well . . .” She paused, thinking through my last comment. “I can put your name and number in the file. That way I can call you when the criminal investigation is completed and the case is officially closed.”

The situation was highly unusual and I could tell that Alfarena Ballew was trying to honor my request while upholding the law and doing her job with integrity.

“Promise me,” I begged, “that you will.”

She promised.

In the quiet of my heart, as I hung up the phone, I prayed that God would allow me the privilege to do what my heart was aching and longing to do by honoring and dignifying the life of this child.

PURSUING A PROPER BURIAL

Every Friday, I called Alfie’s office, hoping for a crack in the case. Perhaps there would be some new lead. A shred of evidence. I waited eagerly, hoping this little one would be released into my care.

As the case unfolded in the media, a barrage of local news reports painted a picture of an unknown, heartless mother who disposed of an unwanted child in this callous manner. At night I continued to journal:

I can’t get this mother off my mind. Every day I think about her. I woke up today thinking about how adorable Andrew, my

son, was at three months. Chubbiness sets in. Smiles come and babies are sleeping through the night at that age. I *wanted* my son. I don't know if anyone ever wanted Baby Doe. Probably not.

As I wrestled to assemble these disparate pieces into a comprehensible whole, I could only imagine that this baby was unwanted. I continued to reflect in my journal:

Being wanted changes everything in the heart of a child or an adult's life. I see it so often in friends and family members of mine. To be welcomed, adored, and desired versus being an intrusion, an interruption, or a disappointment. We all feel it deeply and it somewhat defines us deep down.

Alfie warned me that a criminal investigation could become quite lengthy—quite unlike the ones solved in sixty minutes on television. This provided plenty of time for the what-if questions, about all I didn't understand and couldn't control, to creep into my mind, tempting me to stray from obedience. But, reminding me that I didn't need to see the future he already saw, God was teaching me to trust him one step at a time: all I needed to do was to walk through the door in front of me. So God gave me small steps to accomplish as I waited to discover the identity of this baby: I called a funeral home to arrange a service; I contacted a cemetery that had served other abandoned babies; I prayed for the woman who'd given birth to the baby found in the dumpster.

All I knew about the baby's mother was what I'd gleaned from TV. I had no way of knowing whether or not she was the monster others imagined when they watched the evening news. I didn't know if she'd wanted her child or wanted to get rid of him or her. My instinct told me that whether her child had been planned or unplanned, she would still be grieving. My only certainty was that, whoever she was, God loved her and was filled with overwhelming compassion for her. During the months of waiting, as God continued to soften my heart for this mother, I continued to pour out my thoughts in the pages of my journal:

Baby Doe has a name; I just don't know it yet. I will meet a grieving mother. I will offer her help. I will tell her she has not been alone this past year. I have waited with her. I have hoped with her that this baby would be given dignity.

And I prayed that God would open a door for me to know her.

I suspect my heart connected so deeply with this mother because I too was grieving—as a mother and as a daughter. I was a grieving daughter, having recently buried my mother. But I was also a mother who was grieving the precarious future of the daughter I loved.


Anna's terrifying illness, which could easily have snatched her away from our family, had activated both my fierce maternal instincts to protect her and a fiery advocacy on her behalf before the throne of God. These same impulses were unleashed again when this baby's body was discovered in a dumpster. And they fueled me as I fought to honor the life of that child as if he or she were my own.

How many times had I watched the horrors on the evening news, breathed a quiet prayer for those who suffered, and returned to my life and family? And yet now God's Spirit was prompting me to step into a stranger's deepest pain. Had I declined, no one around me would have been the wiser. Had I heeded the internal voice reminding me how awkward it was to be pursuing something that wasn't my business or my area of expertise, my life would have continued as it was, normal but lacking and slightly broken. But somehow my small yes to making one phone call was opening me up to sense and respond to God's leading in a fresh new way. Calling me into deeper obedience, God daily assured my heart—in the time we spent together each morning—that his voice was the only one that mattered.



CHAPTER 2

Though My Father and Mother Forsake Me

n a crisp, cold January morning, just three months after learning of the baby who had been abandoned, I dropped my husband off at the Indianapolis International Airport for a men's leadership retreat in Florida. Returning home, I felt the bite of bitter cold in my garage, and perhaps a nip of jealousy that I wasn't headed to Florida. I ducked into the house and went upstairs to my desk.

Since it was a Friday, I did what I did every Friday morning: I called the coroner's office to check on the Baby Doe investigation. As had been the case every Friday for the last three months, Alfie relayed that there were no new developments.

"But," she added with a long pause, "I'm glad you called. I was just about to call you."

Call me with no news? She piqued my curiosity.

Alfie went on to tell me about a baby who had been abandoned at the coroner's office. A five-month-old, African-American male, who had died of natural causes while at his grandmother's home. Since there was no criminal investigation into the circumstances surrounding the death, the baby's body could be released.

For one month, however, no one had claimed him.

The more Alfie shared, the more troubled I felt.

And as she spoke, I glanced through the sunroom and noticed my dog, Sedalia, a yellow lab, frolicking in the back yard. If I *had* been able to join Steve on his trip to Florida, we would have dropped Sedalia at a local kennel the previous day. In order to leave her for even a long weekend, we would have been obligated to sign a document acknowledging that abandoning a dog at a kennel was a criminal violation. We would even be bound to pay all legal fees if prosecution became necessary! And yet a child wasn't afforded the same protection?

My head swirled with more questions, and each answer Alfie shared broke my heart.

Neither the boy's mother, who was homeless, nor her family had taken any steps to accept responsibility for him. They wouldn't even respond to the coroner's request to retrieve him for burial. Though the chief investigator for the case had visited the home of the baby's grandmother and made repeated phone calls, the family had ignored the requests.

As Alfie spoke, I was already feeling a familiar internal tug to embrace this child by giving him a dignified burial. Then Alfie asked me if my "organization" would want to help.

Thankfully, I didn't blurt out what I was thinking: *What organization?* Did I need one?

While others would begin to catch the vision for life that God was sowing in my heart, and would eventually ask to join in, at that point there wasn't any *organization*. There was simply the gentle whisper of God's voice, "This baby needs a family and I'm in this with you. I am all you need."

I certainly didn't feel equipped for what lay ahead. *Who in their right mind*, I wondered, *would willingly move toward death instead of flee from it?* No sooner had I wondered it than a face filled my mind. It was the countenance of Jesus who, moved by love, had chosen the sting of death.

At least I was in good company.

For years I had been growing to recognize the sound of God's voice, even when he asked the most unlikely things, and I knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that I had been called to do this.

That was enough.

A few years earlier I had been given Mother Teresa's book *No Greater Love* as a gift. In it she writes, "I will take any child, any time, night or day. Just let me know and I will come for him."¹ I felt this same sense of urgency about Zachary.

LOOSE ENDS

Alfie patiently detailed some of the obstacles surrounding the case.

Because the baby's mother didn't have a residence, she wouldn't be able to request assistance from the Marion County Trustee office that offered a small stipend toward burial to struggling families. Cremation, Alfie explained, would be the cheapest option. She told me that Derek Harris, the coroner assigned to Zachary's case, had located the mother in the community just two days prior. Alfie read bits from his report to me that noted that the mother had been "dismissive in attitude" about her child. The baby's mother, she explained, had washed her hands of all responsibility for burial.

A flash of rage at a mother I did not know surged through my body and a single thought pounded in my mind: *I don't understand her.*

The voice inside me was answered by a gentler, kinder voice: "*Right. You can't and you never will.*"

Humility seeped into my heart that had so suddenly been seized by anger and judgment. I didn't know this woman. I couldn't comprehend what she'd endured in her past; I didn't understand her pain; I could not fathom her hopelessness. As a person with resources—not just financial, but social and emotional and spiritual—I had no idea what it was like to live in her skin, to see the world through her eyes.

And in that moment God's Spirit replaced my judgment with a confidence in his love for her. Although I might not ever fully understand her, God knew her name and he loved her. In the same way I held my children in my heart, this woman was held in the heart of God.

She, too, had been somebody's baby.

Before I would get more deeply involved, however, I still wanted to make sure that this mother understood that there *could* be resources available to her. I wondered if access to resources to honor her son's life

might equip her to engage as a mother. I wouldn't usurp that from her, if she would respond.

As we were hanging up, Alfie connected me to Derek Harris. Explaining who I was, I asked for his help.

I explained that I wanted to bury this baby boy and asked him if he would be willing to approach the baby's mother one more time. Because he needed to have her consent for burial, he was willing. He offered to return to the homeless community to find her.

"First," I requested, "can you make sure that she knows she will have help if she wants to bury her baby? I want her to have that option."

"Yes," he agreed. "I can explain that to her."

But we both knew how his first visit had gone. Though neither of us spoke it, we knew that this desperate mother might still balk.

"And if not," I continued, "can you ask her to sign away her rights so that he can be released to me? I want her to make an informed choice, but if she refuses to care for him, I want to be able to adopt him freely."

As I spoke the word "adopt," a deep resolve rippled through my frame to claim this precious child as my own, with the same steadfast faithful love that God had extended to me. The same love God had for this baby's mother.

BABY ZACHARY

Years ago, when I was pregnant with my second child, I sensed in my spirit that I was going to have a boy. I loved the name Zachary. But the two "Z's"—Zachary Znachko—just seemed a bit too much. So when my son arrived we named him Andrew Steven.

Alfie had told me that the name of this unclaimed child was Zachary. As I held him in my heart, I experienced clarity that *this* was the Zachary God had planted in my heart years earlier. This baby was God's idea, and if he remained unclaimed, I would add him to my family like my own.

Whether he would be buried by his first mother or by me, I knew I needed to find a cemetery. As sunlight streamed through my office window, I combed through archives of news stories about other babies who had been abandoned.

As I searched, I discovered one ministry near Chicago called Rest in

His Arms. There, a woman named Susan Walker had been traveling a path similar to the one down which the Lord seemed to be leading me. Passionate that every life matters, she had been providing Christian funerals and burials for babies who had been abandoned.

I wasn't alone.

I emailed Susan, who kindly pointed me toward resources for the journey. One in particular caught my attention. So before I even knew exactly what Zachary's future might hold, I placed an order for something special I hoped would honor him.

Continuing my local online search, I learned that two Indianapolis children who had been abandoned in recent years had been buried at Washington Park East.

I dialed the cemetery and waited, wondering whether anyone there would be willing to help me. When a sensitive, sweet voice answered the phone, I knew I'd found my helper. After I explained the unusual situation, the kind woman assured me she would go straight to the cemetery's manager with my need. True to her word, my phone rang before the end of the business day to schedule an appointment with the funeral home and secure a cemetery plot.

I'll keep moving ahead, I decided, no matter who finally lays this infant to rest.

The next day, as I finished up my lunch in the kitchen, my phone rang. I recognized the number of the coroner's office.

"Hello?" I answered quickly, eager to know what was happening.

"Mrs. Znachko, this is Derek Harris. I visited the mother of Zachary Tibbetts and she signed over her rights."

I hadn't expected to hear back from him so quickly.

"Did she hesitate?" I queried. "Did she want to bury him?"

"No." He sighed. I thought I heard an apologetic tone in his voice, as if he might have garnered a different response if he'd tried harder. Or perhaps what I heard was an acknowledgment of what felt, to both of us, shameful. He added, "She was ready to be done. The baby is yours."

"Thank you," I gasped.

Zachary was now mine.

After Coroner Harris explained the procedures I needed to follow and the paperwork to be done, we hung up.

Though the kitchen was silent, my heart and mind were busy, searching for answers.

Words from Isaiah filled my spirit:

Can a mother forget the baby at her breast
and have no compassion on the child she has borne?
Though she may forget,
I will not forget you!
See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands;
your walls are ever before me.

(Isaiah 49:15-16)

I understood that, for reasons that were complicated, Zachary's mother wasn't able to care for him. Yet I was convinced that his name was engraved on the palms of God's hands, and—as God gripped me with love for this child—Zachary's name had now been imprinted on my heart. In fact, Zachary means “memory of the Lord.” The seed of possibility that the Lord had planted in my heart years earlier, the “Zachary” who'd been held in my heart, had blossomed.

Through Zachary, God was teaching me how much he values *all* children. For years I'd poured my life into my own four kids: holding, feeding, wiping, rocking, laughing, crying, and comforting. And now God had gripped my heart with the conviction that every child has equal value in his eyes. I knew that Zachary's life was worth honoring. That his family wasn't able to care for him didn't negate Zachary's value in God's eyes or, now, in mine. Nothing could. And in ways I still couldn't fully grasp, the assurance in Psalm 68:6, that God sets the lonely in families, was unfolding before my eyes. God had chosen me to be Zachary's mom in death.

As quickly as I could, I made arrangements to sign the papers for his release. Just eighteen days after the coroner's call, the process was complete. In two and a half weeks I'd been set free to love and honor this baby boy.

ANGEL IN A BOW TIE

A dear friend, who'd buried her husband several years earlier, suggested I contact Indiana Funeral Care. Graciously, director David Ring

was able to meet with me the day I finally had Zachary's paperwork in hand.

It was mid afternoon when I parked in the funeral home's near-empty lot. Carrying my purse and a file folder containing Zachary's paperwork, I made my way toward the building's heavy, white double doors. With each step I felt a sliver of the weight that parents who'd climbed the same stairs before me had borne.

Venturing inside, I was greeted warmly by David Ring, looking dapper in a blue bow tie and tortoiseshell-rimmed glasses. He introduced me to his staff and then directed me to a comfortable chair in a conference room to discuss arrangements.

When David's assistant popped in after about ten minutes, asking him to receive a phone call, I read a plaque titled "The Funeral" on the wall behind the chair where he'd been seated:

The funeral helps confirm the reality and finality of death.
Provides a climate for mourning and the expression of grief.
Allows the sorrows of one to become the sorrows of many.

As I reflected on those words and jotted them down to chew on later, I realized that at every turn of the journey unfolding before me I was learning so much. For years I had chased after God, eager to know him more. And yet, in what seemed to be the most horrendous circumstances for these forgotten children, I now felt closer to his heart than I ever had. Something had shifted inside me, releasing joy from a deep place I'd not known before. I mused that I never would have imagined that, on the heels of my mother's death and daughter's terrifying illness, I would be finding meaning, hope, and *life* in the place of sorrow and death. To a certain extent, I recognized the hope and peace I enjoyed as resonating deeply with the pattern of Jesus's life, death, and resurrection, but I still didn't fully understand it.

God was also teaching me that my idea of family was too small. For so many, including myself, "family" meant the people who raised me or the family I'd raised. Sometimes we stretch the boundaries enough to include folks like us from our churches. And yet, in ways I couldn't yet

grasp, as I opened myself up to loving the poor and the homeless, the widow and the orphan—when I entered in to brokenness and pain and injustice—I found myself gathered up in God’s lap as a member of a new kind of family.

His family.

When the director returned from his call, we discussed one of the most important decisions to be made that day: choosing baby Zachary’s casket. Five months old when he died, he needed a casket sized for a baby, but larger than a newborn. We chose the date for the service and he explained that there wouldn’t be time to custom order a new casket. Mr. Ring glanced over his inventory and told me that they had in stock the exact size that we needed. It was white satin with white trim. In that provision I saw, once again, how God had gone before me.

After finalizing all of the details, I thanked Mr. Ring and returned to my car. On the drive home, I mulled over Zachary’s short life, trying to fit together the disparate pieces. I remembered my own babies at five months—the family and friends who doted over every giggle and gurgle. Had Zachary’s mother gazed into his eyes as she fed him a bottle? Had his grandmother smiled upon him as he slept, imagining what his future might hold? Had his father made an effort to see him? Had anyone brought gifts to celebrate his birth? I had no way of knowing what it was like for him to live on the streets with a desperate mother. Yet I simply couldn’t imagine a scenario in which a mother could release to a stranger the body of a child she’d borne.

When I arrived home I noticed a large brown box on my front porch. I was thankful the porch overhang protected the package from winter’s elements. Picking up the box and carrying it inside, I anticipated the treasure I would find in the box. I set it down on the counter and carefully pulled off the shipping tape.

Peeling back a few layers of tissue paper, I pulled out a hand-stitched burial gown. A friend had recommended a Maine woman named Marcy, at Heaven Sent Baby, who generously created gorgeous gowns for abandoned babies. This one was made of pure white linen. Embroidered in pale blue, the prayerful seamstress had stitched, in perfect letters, “Zachary.” Imagining it draped on his body, I wept. Carefully cradling

the burial dress was the closest I would come to holding or seeing Zachary. The gown felt holy in my hands. The garment was a reminder that Zachary's *life* was holy. He had been created in God's image. His name in life and death was known to God.

I draped the gown across my arm and took it to my closet. Finding the smallest hanger I owned, I hung the white gown beside my own clothes.

ORPHANED IN DEATH

Before I delivered the gown to the funeral home the next day, I closed my eyes during my morning time with Jesus.

For years I'd been in the habit of starting my day this way. I'd learned through trial and error that each day I needed to talk with God, worship him, and listen for his voice by reading my Bible. As someone who's not a morning person, it doesn't come naturally! Each night before I go to bed, I set my alarm with enough time so I won't be rushed the next day.

That morning the Scripture to which the Lord directed me was James 1:27:

Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.

It was like I was encountering Scripture with new eyes and ears. Like so much of what God had been teaching me, I heard again the call for God's people to move into places of grief and sorrow. I was also seeing my world in fresh ways. I saw how those of us who had the ability to avoid suffering—through shopping, entertainment, vacation, and other comforts—distanced ourselves from death's sting. Fooling ourselves, I expect, we behaved as if death would always remain at a safe distance.

And God also continued to remind me that I had no idea what it was like to stand in the shoes of Zachary's mother. I no longer judged her for abandoning her child. And while I wrestled with God about how he could allow a child's life to end as Zachary's had, James's words reminded me that just as God had met Steve and me in the midst of

our despair, God was passionately committed to caring for the poor and brokenhearted.

For three months I had imagined that the baby found in a dumpster would be my first funeral. Yet as the investigation into the identity of Baby Doe dragged on, Zachary found a home in my heart.

I delivered Zachary's gown to the funeral home three days before his funeral. After handing it to the administrative assistant, I returned to my car thinking about his small body that would soon be held, washed, and adorned. As I drove, my mind drifted to my mother's last months, when our relationship became as physical as it had been since I'd been dependent on her as a child. During our visits I fed, bathed, and dressed my mother just as she'd done for me and my six siblings. Just after my mother drew her last breath, I filled a porcelain cobalt blue bowl and washed her feet, my salty tears mingling with warm soapy water. As I neared home, I cried, grieving for the mother I'd loved my whole life and the infant I'd not had the privilege of knowing during his.

Zachary's service was held on an icy cold day in February of 2010. And though I'd already begun to prepare a worship service to honor the life of another baby whose name was not yet known, I now poured my heart and soul into creating a service that would honor Zachary with the dignity he too was due.

On the morning of February 12, I reached into the closet where Zachary's gown had so recently hung. Pulling on my black skirt and slipping into a pair of velvety heels, I imagined David Ring gently easing Zachary's body into his luxurious gown. Bundled up in my warmest coat, Steve and I drove to the funeral home so that we could follow the van carrying Zachary's casket to the cemetery.

When we arrived I saw a long parade of cars at the entrance. Those gathered included members of my family, church friends, my children's friends whose parents had taken them out of school to attend the service, as well as others who'd heard about Zachary's short life. These included cemetery staff, a few strangers, and a representative from a local crisis pregnancy center. Each one had shown up to remember a short life they believed was worth honoring. At the gates, Steve and I pulled ahead of

them and they followed us, winding through the cemetery toward Zachary's site.

LULLABY FOR A BABY

Arriving at the plot, we parked and approached the burial area. A fresh snowfall made a beautiful white blanket to cover the ground and trees. The blue sky was pristine and the sunlight made the trees dance with the reflection of light. Steve gently carried the small casket to rest beside the open grave.

The service began with a welcome and a prayer. As my friend Jennifer sang Brahms's "Lullaby and Goodnight," many tears began to flow.

Looking out across the crowd, inviting them to join me in prayer, I announced that *we* were Zachary's spiritual family. As I began a prayer for him, standing beside his small casket, God reminded me of a vision he had given me many months before. In the vision, I was outside in the grass and stood in front of a small white casket. As this vision unfolded, I understood that God was letting me know that this "church" he was knitting together was one without walls. At the time I hadn't understood what the vision meant and had completely forgotten it. But God had not. As I stood in front of the tiny casket, heels sinking into the earth, looking out at the witnesses who had gathered to honor Zachary's life, I felt empowered by the vision God had so graciously given.

Before she died, my grandmother wore a bracelet with charms symbolizing her children and her children's children. Continuing the tradition, Steve began one for me after my first child, Lauren, was born. The four charms, engraved with birth dates and dangling from my wrist in birth order, represent Lauren, Andrew, Anna, and Caroline. A few days before the funeral, Steve added one more to my mother's bracelet: *Zachary*.

I glanced at some of the friends who stood with us at Zachary's graveside. Conversations with some over the previous week had reminded me how absurd our situation seemed to others. Some appeared baffled as I described my passion for Zachary. The disconnect reminded me that falling in love with a stranger's child, having never known that child in life, was difficult to comprehend. And yet I had connected at such a

visceral level to these vulnerable little ones. The months I'd spent waiting for the criminal investigation into Baby Doe's identity and death had been laden with anticipation similar to what I experienced when I was pregnant. And the essential part of me that God had knit into my bones—to be a life-giver and a nurturer—had kicked into overdrive when I learned of these children who'd been abandoned. So I recognized that the drive fueling me to action was both natural, because it's how God wired me, and supernatural, as God guided each new step.

As Steve rose to read Psalm 27 over the baby we'd grown to love, I glanced down at Zachary's charm, dangling beside Caroline's. And as I listened to the words waft over Zachary's body, the tenth verse suddenly sounded different than I'd ever heard it before: "Though my father and mother forsake me, the LORD will receive me."

Zachary *had* a mother. A father. Even a grandmother. And yet it was the Lord who now—and always—received him with open arms.

The cry of the psalmist is the voice of one who longs to be home with God. In it, I hear the voice of my Zachary:

One thing I ask from the LORD,
this only do I seek:
that I may dwell in the house of the LORD
all the days of my life,
to gaze on the beauty of the LORD
and to seek him in his temple.
For in the day of trouble
he will keep me safe in his dwelling;
he will hide me in the shelter of his sacred tent
and set me high upon a rock. . . .
Though my father and mother forsake me,
the LORD will receive me.

(Psalm 27:4–5, 10)

In the most profound way, the psalm announced Zachary's certain homecoming. Although Zachary was, on earth, homeless and forsaken, he would now and forever see the loving face of his Father. Wrapped in a

royal garment, he'd share a home with God and be held in his lap. He'd be fed by God's own hand and drink from a well of living water.

When Steve and I pulled away from Zachary's service that day, I rejoiced that baby Zachary's legacy would no longer be *homeless* or *abandoned*.

At last he had been *celebrated*.

As Steve drove us toward our safe, warm home, I wrestled to understand what God was up to. Was my assignment finished? Would I be allowed to bury the first baby who'd captured my heart? Humbled, I had no way of seeing what was unfolding before me. If I had depended on my own reasoning while watching the evening news three months earlier—about the sensibility of focusing on the needs of my own family, about the practicality of minding my own business, or even by saying a heartfelt prayer for the tragedy and forgetting it—I would have missed out on partnering with God in honoring Zachary's life. And now I didn't want my "reasoning" to get in the way of God's plan.

All I could do was say yes when God knocked again.

I was discovering it was all God needed.

Alfie's phone call had caught me completely off guard. I'd been willing to say yes to God about the baby who'd been found in a dumpster, but did God have even more in store for me? In ways I never would have imagined, God was opening my eyes to a world in need. And though I couldn't understand the heart or mind of Zachary's mother, God was assuring me that I didn't need to. I needed only to trust God and take the next step with him.