

By all accounts, Midland, Texas is a small city. The *New York Times* says it’s in the middle of nowhere—300 miles from El Paso, 300 miles from Dallas.¹ It’s biggest claim to fame is its role as the de facto capital of the Permian Basin oil field (which I am sure nearly all of you have never heard of). But on October 16, 1987, all eyes were on Midland. Two days earlier, an 18-month toddler named Jessica McClure had been playing with her cousins when she slipped through an 8-inch hole in the ground and fell 22 feet down a pitch-black well. In less than 15 minutes first responders arrived and were on their hands and knees peering down the well with a flashlight. But even the brightest flashlight can only shine so far. Meanwhile, the shock of the moment had worn off of the baby girl and her cries below made it clear she was in distress.

Time for Plan B.

Volunteers tore down the backyard fence and the Department of Public Works hauled in a backhoe. The plan was to dig *around* the hole, but like the light that could only reach so far, the backhoe hit hard rock just a few feet in. As the fire department worked to come up with a Plan C, paramedics leaned into the hole and started singing “Winnie the Pooh” and other songs baby Jessica loved.

Within an hour, rescuers decided to try a narrow rig often used to install telephone lines. Officials estimated that baby Jessica could be out of danger in about 8 hours. For a moment, hope was restored. But 8 hours quickly turned into 12, which turned into 18, which turned into 24, and they were no closer to freeing baby Jessica from the well.

For Plan D, local leaders flew in a mining engineer from New Mexico.² With his guidance, they shifted the direction of their drilling so as to avoid breaking the well, moving at a rate of 1 inch every hour.³ At one point, rescue workers thought they had dug far enough to lower a rope that could reach Jessica only to find that half of Jessica’s body was stuck under rubble. 22 hours turned into 48 hours. They had gone as far as they could go.

¹ Lisa Belkin, “Death on the CNN Curve,” *New York Times*, July 23, 1995, <http://www.nytimes.com/1995/07/23/magazine/death-on-the-cnn-curve.html?pagewanted=all>, accessed December 21, 2017.

² “The Epic Rescue of Jessica McClure,” *People*, November 2, 1987, <http://people.com/archive/cover-story-the-epic-rescue-of-jessica-mcclure-vol-28-no-18/>, accessed December 21, 2017.

³ “Death on the CNN Curve.”

There was only one thing left they could do. Someone was going to have to go down into the well and pull Jessica out his or herself. And so an otherwise ordinary man who was prone to claustrophobia was sitting at home watching the news when he hopped into his pickup, drove to the McClure house, and told the fire chief, "I'll do it."⁴

There were risks though—so many risks. He could get stuck. He could get hurt. He could hyperventilate. They were of no account to him. That's when the fire chief turned to this 6-foot, 145 pound erstwhile firefighter dressed in his rescue gear. He attached a mining light to his forehead and watched with a mixture of admiration and trepidation as the young father of two descended into the depths of the dark.

A hush fell over the backyard.

Reporters from the nascent 24-hour news channel, CNN, lowered their microphones to watch...and perhaps pray. Every minute felt like an hour as the man slithered down the crevices of the well. The rest of us watching on television held our breaths.

Finally...he reached the bottom. And there he found her, Jessica, the one he'd been sent to rescue. Gently and determinedly, he released the part of her body hemmed in by the rock. Then he counted. One hand. Two hands. One foot. Two feet. Recalling the nickname the family had given the baby, he looked deep into her eyes and told her defiantly and triumphantly: "You're out, Juicy."⁵

As witnesses watched Jessica and her rescuer inch up from the depths, tears of foreboding became tears of joy. Dread turned to relief, anticipation became awe. The finality of death was no more for Jessica at this moment. With the sound of this little baby's fitful cry, a nation erupted into a thunder of applause.

So. It. Is. With. God.

More years ago than any of us can count, the rush to know more, do more, be more, set in motion creation's own descent into darkness began. Being the creatures that we are, we decided that we could figure out how to get by on our own. We demanded the trappings of royalty in lieu of God's order of judges. When that didn't work, we split into warring kingdoms. That's when violence, greed, power, and the quest to be right at all costs led us

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

far from home and wondering if God had forgotten us, wondering how in the world could we sing songs of joy and songs of old when all was so bleak. When our Plan A and B and C failed, the Creator stepped in with plans D, E, F, and G— prophets—to lead us back to the light of safety. But we latched onto the dark.

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There was only one thing left to do: Someone needed to come down and pull us back from the brink and guide us home.

We needed to know what God's love looked and felt like. We needed to see what happens when this unstoppable love becomes the heart of all we say and do. And it needed to be in a way that would touch even the hardest of hearts. So God donned the vulnerability of a baby, the longing of our humanity, and the fragility of the body and descended into the dark through an otherwise forgettable place in the middle of nowhere called Bethlehem. With every agonizing scream and push of labor from an unwed teenage mother, with every drop of sweat on an anxious soon-to-be-father's brown skin, tears of foreboding became tears of joy. Dread turned to relief, anticipation turned to awe. With one final push, the finality and fear of death became no more. In a baby's fitful cry, the words creation longed to hear rang forth: "You're out, my beloveds." And the chorus of angels exploded into a thunderous applause. *For you.*

Tonight is not celebration of what happened 2,000 years ago. It's the embrace of what God is still doing today—breaking into the world, into unknown places and abandoned people, the ones without health insurance, the ones staring into an empty bottle, the ones written off as lazy or old to tell us once again: "There is no hurt I cannot heal, no failure I can't make right, no darkness I can't overcome. **I am for you so I became you.**"

Just as he did, 2,017 years ago, the Light shines forth brightly this night to let us know one thing: You're out. You're free.

The best—your best, our best—has only just begun.

The Rev. Dr. Maria A. Kane
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St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Waldorf, Maryland