

Angels among Us

Marguerite Ojala

“And the Lord said unto him, Who hath made man’s mouth? or who maketh the dumb, or deaf, or the seeing, or the blind? have not I the Lord?” (Exod. 4:11)

There are many blessings to having children and adults with special needs in our lives – in our homes, in our families and in our congregations. Each of us probably knows someone who was born with a disability.

Uncle Tim

My uncle Tim Lever is one of these special people. When he was born with Down syndrome, in 1964, my grandparents were advised that it would be best to put him in an institution for the disabled. God guided them to instead raise him alongside the rest of their children. As God’s Word reminds us, we can trust in the Lord and He will guide our lives (Prov. 3:5,6). How different our family would be if they had done as the doctors advised.

Uncle Tim was born with bright red hair and a gentle and happy disposition. He is affectionate with his family and loves everyone. He always tries to connect with people, but due to his disability it’s sometimes difficult for others to understand him. Yet this doesn’t stop him from trying.

Tim doesn’t like it if he thinks someone might be upset with him, so much that he is quick to say he’s sorry and even apologize for things he didn’t do. Tim will hold a grudge if he feels like he has been wronged by someone, but he’s also easily talked out of it and wants to take care of matters.

A Joy and Blessing to Us All

Tim loves excitement, drama and the chaos of large gatherings. When our family gathers, Tim often becomes a source of entertainment as he acts out happenings from the past. He binds us together with the common joy of knowing him and our shared love for him. It has been special to watch how my own children now also benefit from interactions with their great-uncle. They have learned to accept those who are different from us, who cannot do all the things others can do.

We all have fun Tim stories to share. One such story my mother recalls was from many years ago during a sermon by visiting minister, Elmer Alajoki. Tim got up to use the restroom. In the meantime, Elmer finished his sermon and sat down in Tim’s vacant seat. When Tim returned, he tapped Elmer on the shoulder, “My spot, my spot,” he said. Elmer promptly got up and found another place to sit.

Tim has also been a blessing to our Seattle congregation. Everybody knows him. He loves to be helpful and often clears tables after snack or meals. He enjoys passing the microphone at Bible class and

discussions and has enjoyed washing dishes at camps over the years. Some who have lost loved ones tell of how Tim comforted them at their loved one's funeral with a pat on the shoulder and the simple words, "That's okay, it's okay."

His Simple Faith

My grandma always reminded us that Tim was born one of God's children and that he doesn't need to do anything special to make it to heaven. "He's on his way to heaven," she would say. She and my grandpa worried what Tim's life would be like when they passed away or could no longer care for him.

Even in this God has guided and protected uncle Tim, who needs help with tasks of daily living. He has lived for the past ten years with my parents and is able to spend time with his siblings, nieces and nephews and friends. As he has aged, Tim has had disability-related struggles. He has had to spend time in the hospital with health concerns.

In every phase of his life, uncle Tim has retained a child-like innocence and with such simple faith remains one of God's own. His faith is an example to all who know him. He will continue to be cared for in this life until the day God calls him to his heavenly home.

Heather, Our Sunshine Girl

Joel and Shelly Martin

How excited we were when we found out we were going to have a new baby. During one of the early doctor appointments we learned that our unborn child had a heart defect and that a large percentage of babies with that defect also have Down syndrome. Naturally we were a little apprehensive and even a bit upset with the information. We put our trust in God that He would guide us according to His will. After our baby Heather was born, she had a number of surgeries and many doctor appointments, including a successful open-heart surgery at six months of age.

Happy Energy

Heather is a very happy child, a nonstop ball of energy who has a way of involving others. She attracts attention – sometimes a bit too much – and isn't shy even with those she doesn't know. She feels the need to say "Hi!" to people in passing, especially has a liking for babies and wants to hug every one of them. We have been taking many walks in these times of coronavirus, bringing the neighbor ladies yellow daisy bouquets! Heather has received a lot of help from many in our local congregation, both

adults and children, which is very much appreciated. She especially loves and remembers her Sunday school teachers and points them out at church.

Heather loves to play outside, ride her trike and her yellow car. She loves when children want to play with her. At a recent graduation party, she was preparing “food” for a couple girls a few years older than her – they were all having a good time!

A Joy to Her Siblings

Heather is a joy to have in our household. Since her siblings are all older than her, they have been able to enjoy and share the quirky little things that only Heather does. When someone comes home, we can almost guarantee that Heather is waiting close by the door to greet them. Tiffany and Diane, her two older sisters who live away from home, love getting unexpected phone calls from Heather. Her phone calls can turn a bad day into a good one, putting her sisters in a positive mood. She tells them about her day and what she is going to do.

Since Heather has difficulty with speech, she has learned some sign language. She has made some of her own signs for words, some for certain people, some for places she likes to go and others that we don't even recognize at first. She continues to progress in many areas of learning typical to most children.

We are reminded by God's Word that He has made each one of us a unique individual in His own way: “So God created man in his own image” (Gen. 1:27). Our family is thankful for the blessing we received from God – our sunshine child and sister, Heather.

Perfect in God's Eyes

Natalie Kiviahde

When our fifth child, Lewis Daniel, arrived in our lives on an August day nine years ago, we didn't expect the journey we would have with him. Often on this journey, I have remembered the words from Matthew: “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven? And Jesus called a little child unto him and set him in the midst of them” (18:1,2).

Lewis seemed to be a normal baby at first, but at six months of age began three and a half years of doctor visits and testing. Lewis was finally given a diagnosis: his GNB1 gene was mutated. There were only three other known cases in the world at that time, and the doctors told us that he would have to write his own story.

I told our other children about Lewis's diagnosis – that he might never be able to walk or talk or do things like others do, but that God made him how he is and that Lewis is perfect in God's eyes. We will love him still. The kids replied, "Of course we will love him – he's our brother!" They have never questioned why we have a child with handicaps and why God made him the way he is.

Daily Challenges

Having a child with handicaps can be challenging. Since Lewis is nonverbal, we are constantly trying to guess what he wants or needs. He needs constant eyes on him since he gets into plenty of "mischief." We also spoon-feed him – it is like taking care of an infant. Our life in most ways revolves around Lewis. We need to consider him and his needs in our home, our vehicle, our travel, our visiting and our free time.

I have questioned many times why God made Lewis the way he is. Why did He give him to us? I might never know these answers, but I trust that in heaven God gives all answers.

One particular song of Zion expresses the ache that is sometimes in my heart: "All trials are then like a dream that is past, forgotten all trouble and sorrow. All questions and doubts have been answered at last; then dawneth eternity's morrow. Have mercy upon us, O Jesus!" (SHZ 405:6).

Trust in God's Will

The Bible tells me to trust God: "Trust in the Lord with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding. In all ways acknowledge him and he shall direct thy paths" (Prov. 3:5,6). I can trust completely in God's will and plan. I can be happy and rejoice in what God has blessed me with.

It helps when Lewis has such loving and caring schoolteachers, therapy teachers and caregivers, who have such a special gift to care for children with special needs. Lewis currently can walk with a gait trainer, scoots on his bottom and communicates with gestures and a PODD book. He laughs, cries, yells, recognizes people, loves attention and loves being outside.

Daily Contentment

Lewis reminds me daily that we can be happy and content with whatever is put before us. Most importantly he has reminded me that being a child of God in His precious kingdom is so simple – to simply have childlike faith and take care of matters that weigh on the conscience with the precious gospel.

Lewis and our family need prayers. We want to remain in God's precious kingdom until we reach heaven's home. I pray that I can one day see Lewis in heaven running, walking and talking.

Life with Bennett

Leila Jurmu

“The world needs more Bennetts” is a phrase I’ve found myself using often. This is said jokingly – but also seriously. Time has a way of illuminating the many blessings that come with raising a child with special needs.

Bennett helps us see what truly matters in life a little more clearly. When everything feels broken and chaotic and we realize how little control we have in life, all that is left is to trust in God. We know that His will will be done, and it will be good.

Bennett Teaches Us

As time passes and Bennett’s needs become a way of life, we are able to see and understand how blessed we are to have Bennett as our own. It’s incredible to watch his siblings grow up in a world where feeding tubes, treatments, hospitalizations and appointments are normal. They quickly become in-tune to his neurological fragility and know how to respond to him. Without hesitation they leap into action.

Taking care of Bennett has taught us many things, such as kindness, compassion, patience and empathy. We can see and know that in spite of outward appearances and abilities there is so much love and worthiness underneath. We have learned to not assume things, but to freely give grace because we often cannot know or see what is going on behind the scenes. This reminds us to speak kindly of others and show empathy more often.

God’s Plan Is Good

Before Bennett, it would have been incomprehensible to choose this life. We could not have fathomed how a family would cope and would have been even fearful. But here we so clearly can see how God knows best.

Happiness and contentment have become our goals – for Bennett and for us. We understand that tomorrow is unknown and not guaranteed. Therefore, today we appreciate and enjoy Bennett and his presence in our lives. Life has changed for sure; we’ve all had to make adjustments to our own hopes and expectations. But these adjustments are easier when we can see the blessings we’ve been given, like time spent as a family, at home. We have found that we visit more and appreciate each other’s company.

We are incredibly thankful to God for our son Bennett and the blessings that help make our day-to-day life so much more beautiful.

Discussion Points

1. Sing Song of Zion 394, which is based on Psalm 139:13–16. How do the words in this song relate to people with special needs?
2. Read Bible portions John 9:2–4 and Proverbs 3:5–6. What do they teach us?
3. What have been your personal experiences with those with special needs?
4. How or where have you found comfort when faced with struggles or needs, those of your own or of your loved ones?