

Dear Salem Family,

I know many of you have asked, and since it's hard to share it all from up front, I wanted to take this time to share in a bit more detail about our adoption journey and to show my love and appreciation for our church. We'll share a more ministry-centered update next month as we head into fall launch, so you can look forward to that this next month.

As many of you know, this past October was incredibly difficult for us. We were selected a total of three times by families for adoption. The first one fell through within 24 hours, the second we didn't have peace with, and the third we were officially matched. Adoption gives you very little time to prep, so we started the dash of collecting all the necessities (it's funny how the word "necessity" changes as you age - when I was younger packing up my first Jeep Cherokee to the brim with camping gear, fishing gear, rock climbing, mountain bike, etc. - only now to have so much baby "stuff" that I struggle to see out the back window!). As you pack you begin to imagine what Christmas will look like with a second kid. So, despite all the cautions about expectations, you carry them with you along with all your stuff. In the airport we ran into Howard Dahl, and because of our connection with him and Ann, we were able to celebrate together the trip about to happen. As we boarded the plane, our case worker texted saying all was good, so we had every thought this was what God was doing. To make a long story a bit shorter, we arrived in Georgia only to wait five days without hearing anything. To this day we are not sure what happened. What we do know is that child was not for us. All those hopes of a new Christmas. An empty crib. A saddened big sister. Despite our grief, we had to set our sights on coming home. Thankfully, we were able to leave our stroller with our friends, rather than pushing it empty back through the airport, thinking about all the people staring at the strange people and their pretend baby. All that said, in the midst of all that I found myself clinging to something I wasn't expecting. And that's each of you. We felt like we had to disappear for a Sunday unexpectedly, but when Pastor Kent explained why we weren't there, and that our adoption had fallen through, everyone gasped. That may seem strange to you that that's what I find joy in. But to me it communicated that we are a part of the Salem family. You never really know how long it will be for a place to feel like home. I can tell you that Salem feels more like home than our previous ten years.

Once home, Nikki and I had to learn to grieve both separately and together, and if I'm being honest, it was a process often out of sync. We had to build new rhythms for finding time to sit and process all that was going on in our hearts and minds, which wasn't easy. Whoever said marriage was the best and hardest thing you could ever do was right (and compounded by parenting)! At that time, we were still in the gospel of Mark - being challenged over and over to follow in the footsteps of Jesus - being shaped into his likeness as disciples. I love the gospel of Mark and am so thankful for how God used it to help us think about coming into alignment together under this new banner of Vision. But there was a residual pain in me for the loss of adoption. I began to see more and more how a similar pain resided in others. I'm still convinced that we all long for the real Jesus. But we also need opportunity and space to ask the question, "Why?" Which is what led us to Habakkuk. But God was working in a way that still fascinates me. That first Sunday, as we read about Habakkuk's opening complaint, I used both the name Josiah (2 Kings 22), and our adoption struggles as a way to identify with those hurting. Little did I know that baby Josiah was born that exact same day, and that we'd get a phone call the next. How beautiful is God's plan! Again, when it was shared that we were unexpectedly gone on a Sunday for adoption, people all cheered. And the same upon return. It was a month of separation as a family, longing to be home, as our agency worked through the grueling and grinding process in the state of Georgia, but eventually we made it home with a new baby boy in hand.

Since home, I have been humbled and overwhelmed (in a good way) by the kind of support we've received. While we might expect churches to do this well, I find that it isn't that common. Tim Keller once published a document about church size. While Salem isn't a mega-church, we aren't a small or medium sized church. We are a large church. The

larger a church, the harder it can be to cultivate a family *feel*, that coincides with *function*. While we can't do everything a small church can, I can tell you that I am so thankful for the family culture Salem has. The prayers, the meals, the visits, the new Chicago Cubs outfits (sorry...had to get that in there), the texts, the congratulations....all of which have added up to one thing...love. This church, though not perfect, is a church that loves well. Salem was so excited to see baby Josiah...like they were invested in our story with us! Additionally, Eden was not overlooked. People gravitated to her as his big sister. Thank you to each of you for coming alongside us all. We are incredibly grateful!

And while they may not want it, because they certainly don't advertise themselves, I must highlight and say thank you to Judy Hannestad and the Care Team for helping facilitate the love we received. I don't think people in our church realize how much they do. They embody our values of Selfless Service and Extravagant Love. They are the glue of the family culture. So, a huge thank you to them! And an equally huge thank you to each of you who make Salem so great. To God be the glory!

I believe I've said this before, but it continues to be true, growing deeper and deeper with each year, I'm reminded of Paul's words when he wrote: *"I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy, because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now. And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ. It is right for me to feel this way about you all, because I hold you in my heart, for you are all partakers with me of grace, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel. For God is my witness, how I yearn for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus. And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God."* (Philippians 1:3-11)

I've relearned two simple things through all of this. First, every morning when you wake up reteach yourself the gospel. Today is not about you or what you can accomplish. It's about Christ. No matter your struggle, Christ is already victorious. Second, do your best to point people to that same reality. The more you do, the more joy and peace you will experience.

Yesterday was a hard day for Salem, losing both Pastor Thomas Inyu and Shirley Hogness. I trust that our church will rally around them like you rallied around us. Our aim must be to never waiver in pointing people to the clear and compelling gospel of Jesus.

With all my love and gratitude,

Pastor Seth Dunham