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I’m a native of Atlanta, born in one of the only two hospitals in the area that at that time would give care to African American mothers. With my birth came complications and there were strong fears that I would not survive. My mother, a devout Christian, realized the need for intervention and dedicated the young baby to God, promising (like Hannah) that she would give me to the Lord if I lived. I did live, totally unaware of my mother’s promise.

My childhood and teenage years were unremarkable as I remember them, but at age 17 I joined the U.S. Air Force as a medical corpsman. My first placement was with babies in the ICU in San Antonio, Texas. My second was in an adult oncology ward. But as a 17-year old I was neither ready for babies in intensive care nor dealing with death in a cancer ward. So I transitioned to the emergency department as a paramedic.

As a 22-year old Air Force medic I began to doubt that God was real. I wasn’t sure I wanted to be a Christian anymore. As I discussed my feelings with a tall young chaplain, he said something I’ll never forget: “Be faithful to your calling and be faithful to God.”

I took two weeks of leave and spent them in a library with “The Desire of Ages” and the Bible, challenging God to make himself real within two weeks. When I reached the chapter about the Garden of Gethsemane, suddenly I knew for a fact not only that God died for me but that he died because of me. My subsequent weeping brought a concerned librarian to check that I was okay. I was. I had just experienced conversion.
That conversion led me toward ministry with a goal of chaplaincy. The next few years saw me at Oakwood College, then the seminary at Andrews. I remember both fondly, along with the ministry experiences I had, such as three months in West Africa as student evangelist, leading to over 1,200 baptisms, and pastoring in Chicago while a seminarian.

I graduated, returned to Atlanta and was soon ordained. That is when I heard about my mother’s promise to God so many years before. She hadn’t told me earlier because she wanted me to be who God wanted me to be; not for me to feel forced by her promise into what she thought God might want.

After ordination, I went back into the military, this time the Navy, and served as a chaplain in the Marine Corps in both the United States and Japan. With my young children in mind and my wife’s wishes to reconnect with family, I received my discharge from the military and returned to my childhood home in Atlanta where I turned my skills to hospital chaplaincy.

The 17-year-old who had not been ready to work with babies and with death, ended up in the children’s hospital in Atlanta, dealing with pediatric oncology—children with cancer. For 14 years I worked with families and staff who were struggling with the tremendous emotional burdens attached to suffering and, too often, the death of children.

Despite the tragedy, you learn to see God’s hand moving amongst the suffering, often seen in the simple and real faith of the children themselves. I became God’s representative at the time when God’s love and compassion was most needed. I learned to live out the ministry of presence. Ironically some of my time in Atlanta was spent working back in the hospital where I was born, where my mother had first dedicated me to the Lord.

To all my fellow life sojourners: God loves you. God is real. But don’t take my word for it, or the word of your parents or friends. God likes us to ask questions. He wants us to probe and find out for ourselves.