
Thanks be to God for the Jet Skis

**An article for the *Cathedral Times*
by the Rev. Canon Ashley Carr**

One day this spring, I was gearing up for a pastoral visit at the Shepherd Center. Given that this hospital specializes in spinal cord and traumatic brain injuries, it's not a place that I often visit. Between you and me, I do not like going to hospitals. Eleven years a priest, and it's never gotten easier to walk into those buildings. I've never grown accustomed to the sights and smells, and the emotional toll, while worth it, weighs heavily on my heart. So, I was pre-sad before going to the Shepherd Center. I knew what I would see. I knew I'd see so many people with life altering injuries there with their families grieving a life that could have been. I knew I'd see sad souls whose bodies felt like strangers. I knew it was going to suck.

What I didn't know is that as I wound through the parking deck there would be jet skis (wave runners? What's the difference?). To my surprise, parked right there on level one were several jet skis, dusty from their winter slumber. What were they for? What water do they go in? Who uses them? I couldn't imagine their purpose, but the edges of my mouth tugged a bit and I found myself smiling.

Inside the hospital, as predicted, there were many people with life-altering injuries that incapacitated parts of their bodies and minds. But it wasn't sad. Here were these people in this immaculate facility smiling, joking, and being ushered around by cheerful medical professionals, sometimes four or five to one patient at a time. There were wild contraptions to lift and move, to encourage and heal like nothing I've ever seen in any other hospital. A pool, balls of all shapes and sizes, even a dog! Astonished, I remembered the jet skis and found myself smiling, again.

The situation with this friend I saw was difficult and sad, but we told jokes, prayed, and cried together, as we do next to hospital beds. I walked out of the room and down the hall, past all of these souls working so hard for their own lives and the lives of others, and through leftover tears, I found myself smiling. I was flooded with something that I can only now make sense of as hope. Not some theoretical nebulous idea of hope, but real God-given hope that assures us that come what may, life, or a bit more time could be possible and maybe even good.

Whether you think of hope as waiting, like in the Hebrew Bible, or as trust and confident expectation as in the New Testament, there are stories upon stories of the faithful grounding their entire beings on the idea that God will act, hope. Jeremiah, Isaiah, Paul, and Jesus himself encourage us to anchor ourselves in the assurance of hope. Things might still suck, but there might be unimaginable possibilities in God's handiwork.

At the Shepherd Center, I figured that all hope was lost. Instead, I saw these lives that might have gone one way now going in a new direction, and while that may be difficult, and the outcome might not be the life one imagined, still the spirit of hope prevails. Because hope is strong enough to carry grief alongside the promise of newfound God-given abilities and strengths, or even a cheerful soul at the bedside. Alongside with the inevitable physical and emotional pain of dreams laid to rest is God's creative handiwork that puts us on jet skis when he isn't done with us quite yet.

I don't know the stories, the newly impossible dreams, or the pain of anyone at the Shepherd Center. I don't even have a clue what those jet skis are used for, and I don't really want to know. I do know a wonderful and creative God who acts in the most surprising and sometimes downright strange ways. To see hope alive in a place that, to an unknowing observer, might seem like a container for despair, reminds me that no matter where we are and what's happening, God is here and we can anchor our hope in that assurance, whatever the outcome may be. It sure is easy to lose hope in the grim realities of life, so thanks be to God for the jet skis that remind us.

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