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## “Our Shot”

A sermon by Marilyn T. Hedgpeth

Texts: Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16; Luke 4:1-13

First Sunday in Lent (Year C)

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**Alexander Hamilton:** an illegitimate child, from a poor, broken family  
on the Caribbean island of Nevis.

As a teenager, he makes such an impression in writing about a hurricane  
that ravished his homeland,

that a group of elders teams up to send him to King’s College/Columbia University  
in New York as America is struggling to gain its independence from England.

Hamilton endears himself to General George Washington, becoming his aide-de-camp.

And thus begins the story of an immigrant- turned-nation’s founder,

revolutionary, lawyer, word-smith of the US Constitution,

Secretary of the US Treasury, and creator of the first national bank.

Ron Chernow tells his story as biography,

as does Lin-Manuel Miranda in his award-winning musical, *Hamilton*,

which debuted in 2015.

Hamilton is young, ambitious, idealistic, exuberant, determined,

surrounded by powerful companions, yet tragically flawed, nonetheless.

The signature song from *Hamilton* gives insight as to the inner motivation

that drives this man as he rises up from the wilderness of his beggared youth  
to embrace his purpose. Alexander Hamilton sings....

*I'm not throwing away my shot*

*I'm not throwing away my shot*

*Hey yo, I'm just like my country*

*I'm young, scrappy and hungry*

*And I'm not throwing away my shot.*

(Miranda, Lin-Manuel. "My Shot," *Alexander Hamilton*, 2015)

**Jesus Christ:** He's young, scrappy and forty-days hungry.

Still dripping wet from his baptism, he's seized by the Holy Spirit

which locks onto him like a giant dove,

and affirmed by the booming God-voice from heaven that declares him

23and Me, Ancestry.com, bona-fide family member. Welcome to the God family!

The Holy Spirit is his God-gift, like a service pet, that will never leave his side,

no matter where he goes, or whom he chooses to keep as company.

If he rises on the wings of dawn, or settles on the far side of the Sea of Galilee,

even there, God's gift of the Holy Spirit will remain with him,

inseparable, as his constant companion and guide.

And, as if to prove the veracity of its tenacity, that same Holy Spirit leads Jesus

from water to wasteland where he and the Spirit will be tempted to part ways.

**Can anything separate us from the love of God,**

**and from the gift of the Holy Spirit imparted to us at baptism?**

That is the question I want us to consider.

Perhaps the devil, himself, can separate Jesus from God's gift of the Holy Spirit.

Perhaps the devil can drive a wedge between the two.

The devil certainly gives it his best effort, tempting and taunting Jesus

three times at his weakest moments,

when he is overwhelmed by hunger, loneliness, and helplessness.

*"Aren't you hungry, Jesus? How about turning this stone into a loaf of bread,*

*and feeding **yourself** for a change, instead of worrying*

*about all those other people and their needs?*

*If you truly are the Son of God, you certainly aspire to economic and material*

*certainty, don't you? It would make your ministry so much easier!*

*How about a little political power, Jesus? An appointment perhaps, an*

*ambassadorship over several political domains? You certainly want socio-political*

*sway, don't you, to become the Messiah whom your people expect you to be?*

*The good news of your Messiahship would spread so much quicker, Jesus,*

*if you greased the rails of the gospel train with a little power politics, you know.*

*Or, even better, how about exchanging your gift of the Holy Spirit, selling out,*

*for a chance at immortality? Come on now, let's make a deal:*

*your loser vision of the way God expects you to serve,*

*or my alternative vision of fatness, success, glory,*

*and all the global power and authority befitting the Son of God."*

And this is where I want Jesus to clap back at the devil with Hamilton's song:

*I'm not throwing away my shot*

*I'm not throwing away my shot*

*Hey yo, I'm just like my country*

*I'm young, scrappy and hungry*

*and I'm not throwing away my shot....*

Jesus' "shot" is God's baptismal gift of the Holy Spirit,

which forms and shapes his identity

as a child of God and empowers his ministry.

And nothing, not even the devil, is going to separate him

from that sign, seal and token of God's binding and abiding love.

The Holy Spirit leads him into the wilderness to show him that steadfastness.

And you know, I think the devil actually does Jesus a favor here,

by prefiguring those fickle crowds and the peer pressure they will apply

to tempt and test Jesus in similar ways.

As a matter of fact, right on the heels of his inaugural speech in Luke,

when he declares that "the Spirit of the Lord is upon me,"

immediately the fickle crowds turn on him and

try to throw him *and his shot* off a cliff!

That Spirit upon him is his God-given baptismal gift. That is his shot.

That same Spirit, also, is *our shot*.

**David Hogg:** one of the survivors of the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School

shooting in Parkland, FL on February 14, 2018,

which killed 17 students and staff members.

David was a senior at the time and he was not shot,

but he certainly was one of the many emotional victims of the shooting.

Nevertheless, he has gone on to become an advocate for gun control,

and a grass-roots, student-activist leader against gun violence.

He is one of the 24 founding members of Never Again MSD, a gun control

advocacy group, which has been involved in protests, marches, and boycotts,

which have resulted in "red flag" gun control laws being passed

in nine states, but not in North Carolina...yet.

(Folley, Ryan. *Associated Press*. “Gun-seizure Laws Grow In Popularity Since Parkland Shooting,” 2/10/17)

He also helped organize the March for our Lives movement for stronger gun violence prevention measures,

in which our own Laura McDow is very active!

David has been tempted and tested, almost devil-tested, I would say,

to give up numerous times,

as some critics have accused him of “show-boating” his experience as a survivor, in order to bask in the media attention and glory. Ha!

Others have even taunted him publically concerning his three college rejections, claiming that good schools will not accept him because of his radical stance on gun law reform and his rebel-rousing civic engagement.

But guess where David Hogg is going to college next year? Harvard!

Harvard knows a good thing when they see it,

and they have offered him a spot in next year’s freshman class.

David Hogg has not thrown away his shot to affect change.

This experience of being a school shooting survivor, as horrible as it is,

is his shot at making positive change in the gun culture of American society.

And he has not thrown away his shot.

**Len Bias:** He was an All-American forward at the University of Maryland, who was named ACC player of the year both his junior and senior years.

In 1986, Hedge and I met Bias in the Raleigh airport during his senior season right after an overtime victory against top-ranked UNC

where he had scored 35 points.

Hedge was at that game, and he rushed over to pump Bias' hand,  
and to congratulate him on Maryland's amazing victory.

Len Bias was on top of the basketball world,  
touted as one of the most dynamic basketball players in the nation.

Bias would go number two in the overall NBA draft on June 17th of that year  
to be selected by the Boston Celtics.

Two days later, as he celebrated with friends one of the most euphoric moments  
of his young life and his bright future, he died

from cardiac arrhythmia induced by a massive cocaine overdose.

His tragic untimely death reminds me of the poignant poem by A.E. Housman,

"To an Athlete Dying Young,"

*Smart lad, to slip betimes away*

*From fields where glory does not stay,*

*And early though the laurel grows*

*It withers quicker than the rose.*

Len Bias threw away his shot, literally. He had a basketball shot unrivaled by others.

He had a shot at being even greater than the great Michael Jordan.

He had a shot at using his incredible athleticism to help his family financially,

and he was dead at 22.

So many of us shoot ourselves in the foot, it seems, because we are so... flawed.

Rarely do any of us live up to our God-given potential, our giftedness to the world.

Jesus is the exception, not the norm, in this case.

But friends, here is the amazing grace of the Gospel.

Because God has claimed us as God's own,

God has gifted us with the tenacity and power of the Holy Spirit,

our shot, which can never, ever be wrested from us, in life or in death.

As God says through the prophet Isaiah, “Fear not, for I have redeemed you.

I have summoned you by name; you are mine.

And when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you.

and when you walk through the fire, you will not be burned.

For I am the Lord, your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.” (Isaiah 43: 1-3)

Through the waters of baptism, God has poured out his Spirit upon us;

and through the bread and cup,

Jesus has poured out his body and blood for us.

Therefore, we are indelibly marked as Christ’s own beloved ones.

And the triune God never, ever throws away his or her shot to love us, to reach us,

to teach us, to use us, to redeem us, to purpose us and

to re-purpose us, to bless us, to heal us,

to forgive us and to raise us up from death to new life in Christ.

Even Len Bias, the athlete who died young, is having a new shot at affecting change

in American drug policy, as his mother, Lonise, and his best friend,

Derrick Curry, use his tragic legacy to wage their own war

on drugs and on draconian drug policies that punish the victims,

many of whom are but children, without offering reform and hope.

Bias’ legacy is now being reconsidered as more than just that of a basketball legend.

His name now is the impetus behind an organization

known as Families Against Mandatory Minimums,

which is working to reduce and reform the sentences of those arrested

for possession of crack cocaine.

God has not thrown away God’s shot at redeeming Len Bias,

and in using his short life

to bless others. His life is still precious. His God-gift still summons  
compassion, encouragement, hope, and good decision-making.  
(Shuppe, Jon. *US News*. “30 Years after Basketball Star Len Bias’ Death, It’s  
Drug War Impact Endures”, 1/19/16.)

As we baptize little Luke Bennett this morning,

let us remember that the Spirit of the Lord conferred upon Luke  
is God’s baptismal gift, *with us always, even to the end of the age*,  
to Luke and to us, God’s shot, God’s blessing, God’s empowerment,  
God’s encouragement, God’s redemption, and God’s abiding love,  
to raise us up, to confront, and resist evil  
and use our flawed and limited lives to bless others,  
in the presence, power, and purposeful way of Jesus,  
in this life and in the life to come. Thanks be to God. Amen.

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*Because sermons are meant to be preached and are therefore prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation (i.e., are written for the ear), the written accounts occasionally deviate from proper and generally accepted principles of grammar and punctuation. Most often, these deviations are not mistakes per se, but are indicative of an attempt to aid the listener in the delivery of the sermon.*

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