

The Call

The passage from the prophet Jeremiah that we heard this morning is one of my favorites. There is so much I like about it – God’s statement that he knew Jeremiah even before birth, Jeremiah’s protest that he is much too young to speak for God, and the startling, anthropomorphic action of the Lord putting out his hand to touch Jeremiah’s mouth. Again and again I find reassurance in these verses in all that I do.

This same passage was read at the service at which Raisin and I were ordained to the priesthood, so it always reminds me of that, as well. It has been a while since I’ve told all of you how it is that I became a priest, and some of you have never heard the story. Given that Trinity Cathedral is intimately involved in it, it is worth repeating.

Raisin and I came to this Cathedral in 1983 to sing in the choir. She was raised a Roman Catholic and I a Lutheran, and the Episcopal Church was a place where we both felt at home. We met singing in college and had sung together ever since. Organist Tom Robin Harris and Choirmaster Ron May welcomed us into the Cathedral Choir. A few years later Tom Harris made a curious offhand comment to me, after Dean MacBurney had left to become the Bishop of Quincy. Tom looked at me said, “You should be Dean.” I thought he was nuts.

A decade later Raisin was being drawn toward church leadership. Those of you who were here then know that at that time the roles for women at the cathedral were quite limited. On the other hand, the rector of St. Peter’s in Bettendorf was Sharon Mahood, a good priestly role model. It’s not surprising, then, that Raisin was drawn there.

In 1998, four days before I was to begin teaching the fall semester at St. Ambrose University, I had a serious bicycle crash on the Duck Creek bike path, breaking my left leg and arm. (Fortunately, I was wearing a helmet that saved me from a fractured skull.) For the next two weeks I was in the hospital and in a wheelchair for two months. The outpouring of love and assistance during that time was overwhelming. John and Ann Gardner offered their house until I had recovered enough to manage the stairs in our own home. St. Ambrose friends had already built a ramp at home so my wheelchair could get in. I couldn’t do much besides read and reflect, so I called it a time of “holy uselessness.”

Even after I could walk again, it was still some time before I regained full strength. One Sunday our family came to the Cathedral and I slowly made my way up to the high altar for communion. I have to admit that I came with an attitude. That altar seemed to represent all that I found difficult here. As I knelt waiting to receive, I decided to look at it again. I was not prepared for what happened next. Weak, angry, unwilling, I felt an incredible pull right to the center of the altar, so strong that I had to check to be sure that I hadn’t flipped over the altar rail. There was no mistaking it. It was aimed right at the center, where the priest stands. Shaken, I made my way back to our pew and sat down. I realized that I finally had to say “Yes” to what many had been urging me to do for a long time: enter the process toward ordination. Raisin and I began it together, and on June 16, 2007, we were ordained priests at the same service. I always like to point out that she was ordained before me, so she is the senior priest by about sixty seconds.

In seminary, we had taken a practicum affectionately known as “play church.” Students signed up for various liturgies which were then critiqued. One was a Eucharist at an east-facing altar like the one here at the cathedral. Few Episcopal churches have them anymore; even many Anglo-Catholic parishes have arranged the altar so that the priest can face the people. I thought that maybe someday I might be supply here at Trinity Cathedral, so I signed up for the east-facing Eucharist. Little did I know that one day I would be celebrating here on a regular basis.

When the initial search process after Dean Harris’s departure did not result in a call, Bishop Scarfe decided to give the Vestry several names as allowed by the church canons. When he asked me if he could submit my name to you, I was speechless. I felt like Jeremiah. God did not touch my mouth, but I remembered how others saw more in me that I am able to see in myself, so I decided to trust the Holy Spirit and say yes. And now I am here, standing at the center of the high altar every week.

Since I last told you this story, there are two sequels. One December weekday a couple of years ago I came into the rear of the sanctuary and thought, I do like being here in the back. As if on cue, I felt an invisible beam like a tractor beam pulling me forward until I was standing right in front of the tabernacle where Jesus lives, in the Reserved Sacrament. It wasn’t quite God’s hand touching my mouth, but it was clear enough. Then last year when I was praying Noonday Prayer at the high altar on a very dark and gloomy weekday, feeling especially low after a hard week, the sun suddenly came out and lit up the tabernacle for a few seconds. Later I discovered that it was exactly a year after the tractor-beam experience.

I tell you all of this not for my own sake, but to remind you that God is there in each of your lives if you are open to God’s presence. It is also a reminder of what Trinity Cathedral has meant to this community and to the diocese. This parish was established to glorify God and to equip Christians to go out and change the world. It has also formed church leaders. The presence of a curacy – not just the person of Father Sinclair himself as the present Curate, as much as he and his family are a gift to us – but the presence of the position of Curate here at Trinity is a great gift that we give to the future Episcopal Church. I have said again and again that the world desperately needs the hope that Jesus Christ gives. We provide that hope through our own lives and through those we train to be future leaders of the church.

Sometimes God speaks directly, like he did to Jeremiah. Sometimes there is a precise moment one can point to, an unmistakable experience like mine. Often, though, God’s voice is subtle. It may come through people who know us and love us. It may come at a time when we are weak and weary and unwilling. One thing is certain, however. We all have a story. God continues to call us, no matter who we are or what we do. It is up to us to stop and listen, to hear where the Holy Spirit would take us. And if we do listen, we may end up in a familiar place where we never expected to be.

[Pentecost 11: Jeremiah 1:4-10; Psalm 71:1-6; Hebrews 12:18-29; Luke 13:10-17.]