

Love Them Into Their Calling

—a sermon given by music director Sanford Dole in 2003.

Readings: Genesis 1:1-5, Mark 1:4-11

Talk about baptism! To be sitting in this [presider's] chair, or any pulpit for that matter, for the first time in my life is a daunting and somewhat terrifying experience. But I'll tell you, this is not nearly as scary as sitting in *that* chair [cantor's chair] for the first time. For those of you who don't know me, it was ten years ago today that I became St. Gregory's music director and sat at the rector's left hand for the first time. A decade ago we were a much smaller church in every way, worshipping in a rented chapel across town. Running the service fell to three people; the preacher/presider, the deacon—back then it was usually the same person every week who knew the drill—and me, the cantor. The hitch was that there was no script. I was just given a list of musical selections without a guide as to how and when they were to be sung. When the deacon announced the next event in the service it was as much news to me as it was to the congregation. On the first day, I was completely flying by the seat of my pants. I had attended only one service at St. Gregory's, about 2 months prior, and could only recall that the service had many unique attributes which I was to help lead and guide. It was sort of like those stories we hear about the pilot of a small plane who has a heart attack and the only passenger, a complete novice, has to be taught how to land the plane from the ground over the intercom. It took me months to remember that after the deacon announces the page for the incense hymn, we don't just launch into it. Rather I give a pitch to the presider, who chants a collect *before* we sing the incense hymn. Just as I was getting the hang of things, it was April and I was confronted with Holy Week followed by seven weeks of Eastertide during which our service is somewhat different than the rest of the year. You have no idea how confusing it was!

Somehow, with everyone's help and patience, I began to get comfortable with the job. St. Gregory's flourished and grew. The choir, which had all of five members when I first arrived, grew to around twelve in the first three years. Then we moved into this wonderful edifice. On our first Sunday here, October 1st, 1995, with the help of some of my singer friends to expand our ranks, the choir performed its first concert. Within weeks there were 15 regular members of the choir and in a few months we were at 18. Happily, we've been growing ever since, both in musical quality as well as in numbers. In case you are wondering, while not everyone shows up regularly, these days I keep 44 folders active with current music.

But I'm not here just to bask in the glow of the successes we've enjoyed. Today is my tenth anniversary as music director. In this day and age of our fast moving culture, including frequent job changes, this is a fairly important milestone, and I was moved to celebrate this event in some special way. I'm not quite sure why, but I was compelled to ask if I could preach today. I do not feel called to the priesthood, nor do I expect to be preaching again any time soon, but as I've grown into this job I have come to learn that my work here is very much that of a pastor. Along with accepting this about the job, my own spiritual formation has continued apace. If you think about it, in 10 years I've sat through 500 sermons, and more importantly, 500 staff meetings during which we discuss the liturgies, including, sometimes, the preaching. Perhaps I've learned a thing or two. Most importantly, the values expressed and the way Christianity is taught at St. Gregory's resonates with me deeply. This place and I are so perfectly matched that sometimes I fell like I was born for the job. To have work in a position that suits my skills ideally, in a place that I love, surrounded by such wonderful, creative people is a blessing for which I am profoundly grateful. How did I achieve such great fortune? Perhaps the answer is that I was baptized into this work.

Today, from the opening chapter of Mark's gospel, we heard the story of John baptizing Jesus. Traditionally, on this, the first Sunday of Epiphany, the account of Jesus' baptism is read. Although Jesus was not baptized as an infant, I assume that we hear this story three weeks after his birthday with that idea in mind. But let's not debate that point. The makers of the lectionary have determined that we should hear this reading today, and therefore this Sunday is one of the 3 days during the year that we perform baptisms at the 10am service. Today we will be baptizing a new member of our community, the beautiful Eve Merton-Badami, born 3 months ago.

What is baptism? To be honest, it's always been somewhat of a mystery to me. And why we baptize infants, initiating them into something that perhaps ought to be a choice made by rational adults is another

big question in life. I was baptized as an infant and grew up attending church regularly. My parents sang in the choir, and any of our choir members will tell you that undertaking the ministry of singing in a church choir results in a regularity of attendance that might otherwise not be the case. So I witnessed a lot of baptisms growing up—I don't remember ever seeing an adult get baptized—and always wondered what it was about. Throughout my youth I just assumed that my parents belonged to some sort of club that they wanted me to be sure to be a part of. I couldn't quite pinpoint what that was, but the act seems like an initiation rite, so I knew I had been inducted into this mysterious club. Later, when I began to understand that one is "baptized for the forgiveness of sins" I realized that getting baptized as an infant was a loving act on my parents' part. I've certainly committed my share of sins over the years. Maybe my parents were just looking out for me by absolving me of those sins in advance. How thoughtful!

Since coming to St. Gregory's I've come to learn that baptism is as much about us, as it is about the person being baptized. Through the rite of baptism we, the community, are accepting this person as one of our own. When we baptize Eve, we will be taking her under our wing, as it were, to support her with love and guidance, to help her achieve her greatest potential as she grows throughout life. It is our job as fellow Christians already baptized to show her the way as role models for living well in the world. Each time I witness a baptism, I am reminded that not only do I have the responsibility of loving this person, in the broad sense of the word, but that the concept of role-modeling this love is something not just to be practiced with this individual, or this church, but out in the world as well. I believe that God forgives everyone's sins, whether they are baptized or not. We can only respond by showing that kind of love to others. This is why my approach to leading the choir is to "love" them into the results I am after.

Beyond that, there is another aspect to baptism that is perhaps even more important. Mark's account really hits home for me in what happens *after* the baptism itself. Listen again to the story...*read [Mark 1:4-11]*...Note how the actual baptism is just mentioned in passing. Then the sky opens up and the dove descends. God was going to forgive his sins anyway. It is the moment that Jesus acknowledges that God is present and acting in his life that is the important event. Immediately the skies open up and the dove descends. I interpret the dove as God's way of anointing Jesus with a sense of what his true work is. From this point on Jesus, now filled with an acute sense of "calling," goes about his work of teaching, baptizing, and yes, performing miracles.

It is the moment of the skies opening up that I can relate to. While not nearly so dramatic, in the Hollywood sense, as the scene is portrayed in the Bible, I had an experience that is somewhat similar. This event is perhaps the defining moment of my life. I mentioned earlier that I attended church regularly throughout my childhood. I liked going to church. In Sunday school, we often did fun crafts. And from the beginning I sang in the choirs; starting with the "cherub" choir of three-year-olds through the various children's and youth choirs that the church supported. These same activities were the mainstays of my life outside of church as well. The best part of the day at school was choir rehearsal and when I got home I always had some arts-and-crafts project going. Early on I did a lot of pastels, painting and collages. Later I had a macramé period and then a jewelry phase. During high school I began sewing in earnest, which is a hobby I maintain to this day. I was always doing, always creating. Attending rehearsals and performing in choirs, as well as creating arts-and-crafts projects at home, was what I loved to do, so I always kept doing these things. Perhaps there's a reason why we love certain activities. God may want us to be doing them. In my life, there were piano lessons along the way and later, playing handbells kept me busy along with the singing. With all this experience I had become an adept musician by the time I was in high school. I even toyed a little with composing. And, I suppose I had begun thinking about what I was going to do with my life.

Then, one day when I was around 16, God spoke. I had a vision during which I was in direct communication with a higher power. This was the only time in my life that this has happened and is an experience that I've hardly ever shared before. I was walking across campus leaving school one afternoon when suddenly I became aware that above and around me was assembled a host of angels. I felt a sense of love emanating from this large group of beings and I knew that these were my guardian angels, come to let me know of their existence. Then, just in front of me, the largest of these hovering beings, the spokes-angel I suppose, came forward and said, "You are to be a musician." This was somehow not a surprise to me, but I did want clarification, so I responded by saying, "But what shall I be; a singer? a composer? a conductor?" The answer was a calm "Yes," and with that the vision dissipated.

In retrospect, the fact that I had the presence of mind to include conducting, when it was still ten years before my first conducting lesson intrigues me. But the fact is, at the time, and throughout high school, college and beyond, I was confused by this concise yet vague message from above. While it was clear that my calling was to pursue a career as a professional musician, not having a specific focus was a source of frustration. Someone who wants to become a concert violinist has an idea of what the goal is. For me, the goal was slightly clouded, and yet I came away from the vision feeling that good things were in store for me, if I responded to God's call. If God wanted me to be a musician, then I should just go ahead and be one in whatever form that took.

The journey has been round-about, but the rewards have been plenty. Following this path meant that I was making the conscious choice to accept an artist's lifestyle. I knew that I would not have a high earnings potential. And believe me, by San Francisco standards I don't make a lot of money. But God has looked out for me. I've been able to travel, often touring with various groups, and I have and do live well. Thanks to my loving husband, Scott, my devoted friend, George, my supportive family, and friends like you, I live a good life. My standard of living is well above what my actual income might suggest.

My vision of the angels occurred over 30 years ago. I trusted God then by answering his call. How did I respond to the vagueness of the call? I just kept on doing what I do to the best of my ability. Great joy has come to me as a result. 10 years after the vision, I was invited to a friend's house with a bunch of other men to try singing together. That evening led to the formation of a group called Chanticleer, with whom I toured and recorded. This was itself a great and formative experience. But after four years I quit the group so that I could study composition. Several years later, as a member of the San Francisco Symphony Chorus, I had the opportunity to audition for the position of assistant director. Although I had little experience, I knew that I had a knack for the work and my confidence won me the job. What a revelation that was! Along the way I was interested in singing at Grace Cathedral to experience the high church liturgy, and the men-and-boys choir repertoire. This too was a formative experience. I sang there for 12 years and feel that during that time I became Episcopalian, as well as better educated in matters pertaining to church.

Then, one November Sunday, as the sermon droned on, my mind drifted and I suddenly realized that I was ready to move on. I had been through the liturgical cycle twelve times at the cathedral, and it was clear that it was now time, not only to change jobs, but to look for a church job as the music director. I had been singing in choirs long enough to know how to do direct a choir well. As the sermon concluded that day, I made a mental note that in the next few months I would keep my eye out for available church choir director jobs. Perhaps something suitable would come up. It would be a challenge, however, because I am not an organist and often church music directors are expected to play as well as conduct the choir. Oh well, the task would be difficult but not impossible.

God, however, had more immediate plans for me. To this day I don't know if God set me up with the notion, or if she was just waiting for me to feel ready, but a miracle happened. The very next day, Monday morning at 8:00 am, the phone rang. People who know me know that calling at that hour is not a good idea. Fearing the worst, I jumped out of bed and was greeted with a cheery voice that said, "Hello, this is Rick Fabian from St. Gregory's Church. We are looking for a new music director. Your name was given to me as someone who might know of interested candidates. Let me tell you a little about the job." He spent the next 30 minutes explaining St. Gregory's liturgy and what they were looking for in a musician. First of all, they didn't want an organist because there was no organ. But they did want someone who could not only direct the choir but one who could sing because the role of cantor was central to the liturgy. Oh, and they were interested in developing new musical resources; if this person was also a composer, so much the better. At the end of the discussion, once I had picked my jaw up off the floor, I replied that I had one name to suggest; my own. I auditioned, and here I sit, 10 wonderful years later.

I was baptized when I was an infant. But one day, when I was sixteen, the heavens opened up and the dove descended. That day I accepted God's call and was baptized into the true work that was God's plan. The call was not perfectly clear at the time, but of course God knew what he was doing. Heeding the call as best as I could was what mattered. Trusting the vision has led to a very blessed life, including my work with and for you here at St. Gregory's. Perhaps some of you have had similar experiences and know what your true calling is. If you are one of those people that is searching for your true calling, I pray that hearing my story will give you hope that it *can* happen. Whether you feel it or not, God is working in your life.

Keep doing the things that you love. This is what you are baptized to do. And it is through expressing the love of these activities that we can show Eve how to lead a Godly life. Who knows, you might get an early morning phone call one day from a stranger. He or she might say, "I have a job for someone with your skills" and your true calling will be revealed.