

The Rev. Harold Clinehens, Jr.
Trinity Sunday

June 11, 2006
Exodus 3.1-6, Matthew 9.35-38

As many of you know, I try to avoid preaching on Trinity Sunday if I can, as expounding on the theology of the Holy Trinity is not my long suit. When I cannot avoid it, I try to schedule something *really big* in the parish so as to shift the focus away from Trinity Sunday and onto something else. So once again...you will not be afflicted with a sermon on the Trinity from me.

This morning, I'd like to share with you a little about my call to priesthood. I grew up a Methodist, going to church and Sunday School almost every Sunday; then at age fourteen became a "beddist" (someone who stays in bed on Sunday mornings). When I got out of college and moved to San Francisco, my desire for an inner life had come to the surface and I spent a couple of years reading in various Eastern religions: Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism... as so many young people did in the seventies. Meanwhile, my roommate, a good Southern Baptist boy from South Arkansas, wanted to know if I'd been saved. I wasn't familiar or comfortable with that language, but he kept on with it, eventually inviting me to go with him to the Billy Graham Crusade at the Oakland Coliseum. Just to quiet him, I went. No, I did not go down and give my life to Jesus, but I was affected by the experience. There was something in it that touched me, so gradually my reading shifted from Zen Buddhism to reading in the Gospel of John. My experience reading the Gospel of John was truly as Marcus Borg has described, "meeting Jesus again for the first time."

One evening in late spring, I was in the bathtub, actually, trying to warm up, because our apartment was so cold. And as I was reading, bells were going off, because the Jesus I had been introduced to in Methodist Sunday School---"Sweet Jesus meek and mild"---wasn't anything like the Jesus I was reading about in the New Testament. *That* Jesus was a man, a courageous man, and a man I could follow. I didn't know much about him then; I certainly didn't know much about myself; I just knew at that moment that I wanted to be more like him. So I did the only thing I knew how to do: There in the bathtub of that freezing apartment in San Francisco, I prayed to Jesus, asked him to forgive me my sins---and I'd stacked up a few by then--- and pledged to follow him from that moment on, come what may.

There are several other twists and turns of the story, but for the next year or so, I was a Christian looking for the right place to be. I visited several churches, but none of them fit. Meanwhile, I read books *about* the Bible, because I didn't yet feel confident enough to actually read much *in* the Bible. I also was greatly affected by Thomas Merton, the well known Trappist monk. By the age of

twenty-five, I felt like there was some deep religious vocation stirring within me, a vocation for which I had no context.

The Methodist preachers of my youth did not inspire me, nor did the Baptist preachers my roommate liked. I had never consciously thought of becoming a minister of the Gospel, although for a brief time, I considered becoming a monk. Then one day I attended an Episcopal Church with a young woman named Sally, who later was to become my wife, and the mother of Sara and Molly. I came in, looked toward the altar, saw the Holy Eucharist in progress, and was awed...literally brought to my knees... by the mystery...the reverence...the depth... the beauty of it...it was just so beautiful. And I knew...I just knew...that I was being called to be an Episcopal priest. I wept tears of joy and relief there in that pew that day, because the last few years of what had seemed at times as just aimless wandering, now made sense. Within a matter of moments, the direction of my life for the next thirty-three years became clear.

Since that day in 1973, I have fallen in and out of love with the church many times; I have been privileged to share sacred moments in the lives of many people, and I have made many, many mistakes.

When I was rector in Lubbock, Texas, I was asked to give the benediction at the mid-year graduation ceremonies of Texas Tech University. It was a few days before Christmas. It was being held in the old basketball arena on campus, and about ten thousand people were gathered. The program was printed with my name on it; my seat was up front, close to the President of the University at the time, Dr. Laurent Cavazos, who went on to serve in the first Bush Administration. Everyone was poised to start the ceremony, that is, as soon as the benediction was given. But the person appointed to offer the benediction was not there, because that person had forgotten! I was so caught up in pre-Christmas home communions and pre-Christmas duties that I forgot to show up! One of the things about Episcopal congregations for which I am most thankful is their high tolerance for the eccentricities of the clergy!

I come to you this morning feeling many emotions. Sadness, of course, that the journey we began together seven years ago is coming to a close today. But my heart is full with a sprit of rejoicing and thanksgiving that we have seen so much together here. I wanted this to be a combined liturgy today, because the richness and diversity of the music we have come to enjoy and expect is unique amongst Episcopal congregations.

I am deeply grateful to Bud and Cindy and Janice and all choristers and worship team members who tirelessly labor to bring us music that lifts our spirits to live within the mystery of God in this place. I am grateful to acolytes, lectors, LEMs,

ushers, sound people, welcome ministry people, greeters, catechists, teachers, prayer partners, hospitality givers, the flower guild, and others, who contribute week after week to make Sunday mornings beautiful. And of course, the Altar Guild, that special group of St. Wilfrid's women, who is in fact the best darn altar guild in the Episcopal Church, the Anglican Communion, and probably the whole world.

I am grateful to the small group leaders and vestry members I have had the privilege of working with over these seven years, who have been steadfast in their support and vision, and in keeping the main thing the main thing. I am grateful to the staff I have been given to work with, and without whom I would look worse than I do. They are dedicated and faithful and loving and competent. And I am grateful for the people who have come, and become a part of this congregation, as well as those who have not. I have learned from all of them, and I have learned from all of you.

Today I am reminded of a notion that comes from the Eastern Orthodox tradition. It is called, "Between the Dreams" and is best described by having the experience of dreaming a richly textured, engaging, deeply evocative dream, and then suddenly being awakened in the middle of it. Have you ever had that? And when we wake up, what we want more than anything is to go back to sleep, in fact, back to that very place in the dream where we were awakened. And we try very hard to go back to sleep and to go back to that very place, so that we can pick up the dream where we left off. But we cannot. And so we live between the dreams, remembering that wonderful dream we can't go back to, and yet, looking forward to the next dream God will dream in us.

I think that is true for me today on a very personal level; and it may be true for some of you. The Orthodox tradition recognizes that living between the dreams is what we all have to do from time to time in life. Indeed, living between the dreams is what whole generations must sometimes do; living in that hinge point in history between one great dream, like the Renaissance, for instance, and the next, like the Modern Age. Or, living in that hinge point between one great dream like the Modern Age, and the next, like the Post-Modern Age.

The celebrated Anglican Divine, John Donne, knew what it is like to live between the dreams. He became Dean of St. Paul's Cathedral in London on Christmas Day, 1621. The chaotic and disturbing world of the seventeenth century was a period of great personal and political disintegration. It was the death throes of what we call the Middle Ages, and the Great Reformation had been underway for a few decades. Donne heralded the coming of a new era; he assisted at the birth of what we call the modern world; and he was both made and he was scarred by the events, which shaped him and his age.

Donne is fascinating for us because his own person was the battleground of the forces of change struggling for control in his time. Like us, he lived in a world that was dying, Like us, he sensed the birth tremors of a “new thing”, which was so present to him and in him, that he was prepared to risk everything to help usher in the coming age.

But what draws me so compellingly toward Donne is his conviction that *we humans live within the Mystery of God*, a mystery that cannot be objectified. Donne was driven by the conviction that there is *always more*, that human beings are called continually to go beyond ourselves.

Clearly, in the early twenty-first century, we are living between the dreams; living in a chaotic and confusing and increasingly violent time, when many, to use Jesus’ words from the gospel this morning, are harassed and helpless. Such hinge points in history are marked by an intensification of people’s interest in God. Such hinge points in history are marked by upheaval in the church. This is the time in which we live. The General Convention of the Episcopal Church convenes next week. The world will be watching to see if its decisions mark the end of Anglicanism as we know it or something less dramatic. My prayer, as well as my best guess, is that it will be something less dramatic. But make no mistake: This is our time; this is our moment, in which we are being called to be agents of blessing in a broken and confusing and increasingly polarized world.

I do not claim to put myself on the same plane as John Donne, but I do share his conviction that we humans live within the Mystery of God. I do share his conviction that there is *always more*, that we human beings are called continually to go beyond ourselves.

In today’s reading from the Hebrew Scriptures, the awesome, mysterious story of God speaking to Moses out of a bush that is continually burning, yet never consumed, Moses’ encounter with Divine Holiness has a specific purpose. That purpose is to announce that God is bringing justice to an unjust situation. “I have observed the misery of my people... I have heard their cry... and I will send you to Pharaoh, to bring my people out of this bondage...”

Moses asks, “And who shall I say is sending me...what is his name?” And a response that sounds very peculiar comes back: “I AM WHO I AM.” The ancient Hebrew would actually translate into English four letters: Y H W H. No vowels. Sometimes we pronounce it “Yahweh” for convenience. But to do that is to miss the point. The name is unpronounceable and untranslatable. These four letters are an unconjugatable form of the verb, “to be”. It has something to do with being.

“You can’t name me; there is no name for what I AM. Tell them that BEING ITSELF has sent you, *the is-ness of is*. You are standing on holy ground. *Is-ness* is calling you to relieve the suffering of those in bondage.” Throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, God is always concerned with justice, with relieving the misery of the oppressed, the harassed, and the helpless.

In the gospel of John, we are told that Jesus was killed because he was a blasphemer; because he kept making “I AM” statements: “I am the vine. I am the door. I am the bread of life. I am the way, the truth and the life...” Not only was he uttering the name out loud, he was completing the sentence and making it about himself. Of course, they killed him. It was inevitable. After the resurrection, those early Christians worshipped him and formed their lives after his, because he turned out to be just exactly who he said he was.

And he wants us to be who we say we are, as best as humanly possible. If we wish to show something different to those who believe that church people are irrelevant or worse than pointless, or generally judgmental and intolerant, then we have to become who we say we are.

Things are complicated these days, because in North America, we now have followers of Jesus like most of us, who are also church folks; and we have followers of Jesus who see the church as an impediment to following Jesus.

The real purpose of my ministry among you over these seven years has been to help us realign our religion and our lives at least a little bit more with the person of Jesus. Worship, spiritual formation that restores an active and persuasive voice to the Bible, and the recovery of Christian practice, such as prayer, for creating “thin places” of greater spiritual power, have been my focus here. It has, of course, been less than perfect, feeble at times and flawed, because I am feeble and flawed, just a man. Every preacher knows that he is always preaching to himself, always struggling to be what he preaches.

Which is why the church, always and everywhere and in all times and in all places, has to be about God. That sublime Anglican author and spiritual director, Evelyn Underhill, whose life spanned the 19th and 20th centuries, once petitioned the Archbishop of Canterbury to place more emphasis on the importance of the interior lives of the clergy. In her famous letter to him, she quipped, “After all, Sir, God is the interesting thing about religion.”

As I said to you in my letter of April 25th, when I came here as rector in 1999, I had never felt a more profound sense of call to a congregation and its vision for the future. We have accomplished many things together and it has been a

remarkable seven years. And now, after seeking discernment for the future direction of my life, I believe it's time for me to go.

Looking back on that day in 1973 when my heart became a priest, these last 33 years have not been the life I have planned, but it is the life that has turned out to be mine. And a central revelation in it for me is that the call to serve God is first and last the call to be fully human. That's all I can be. That's all I have been.

My heart is full today...very full. I want to thank you for the incredible gift of serving as your Rector. I am thankful today, not just for most of you, but for all of you, because together, as the baptized, we are not just a bunch of individuals; we are the Body of Christ, given the high privilege of serving God in this time, our time.

I love you....Be happy.

I am grateful to Alan Jones, in "The Visibility of Christ and the Affliction of Transcendence", for his insights on John Donne; to Brian McLaren, in *A Generous Orthodoxy*, for his insights on the emerging Church; and Barbara Brown Taylor, in *Leaving Church*, for her insights into the mystery of vocation.