

Les Carpenter's Ordination

January 31, 2009

St. Paul's Indianapolis

Isaiah 6

Bonnie A. Perry

Come Holy Spirit and fill us with the fire of your burning Love—in your Holy Name we pray. Amen.

Good Morning! I am delighted to be here with all of you. My name is Bonnie Perry and I'm the rector of All Saints' in Chicago and we were fortunate enough to have Les serve as our seminarian for two of the three years he was studying at Seabury. What a time we had. In talking to some parishioners here at St. Paul's, even though we have vastly different congregations it seems Les—some themes have carried over. Wayne Turner said to me, We have a phrase here, "Les is more."

Les is something else —he is quite possibly the first person I have ever heard refer to Jesus as "dude"— in a sermon." To which I said, "Wow— Les is the first person in the course of an interview—who referred to me as "Dude". To which Wayne replied, "Well at least you're in good company."

So "dude" this ordination is quite something. What's it got to do— with the prophet Isaiah? (How does this connect with us?) What's going on?

\*\*\*\*\*

He has seen the Lord.  
 With his own eyes—  
 he has seen the Lord.  
 The hem of God's garment  
 trails down from the throne  
 —gauzy- silk-shimmering  
 in the billowing clouds of incense.  
 He has seen the Lord  
 and does  
 what you or I  
 or anyone of us would do  
 —if we were to see our God.  
 He falls to the ground.  
 Hides his face.  
 Head bent down—  
 eyes low—  
 begins to say without even thinking  
 —Oh—I am an unclean man—  
 living in a sin filled world.

My thoughts are not holy  
 —my hopes  
     more profane than profound.  
 He has seen the Lord  
 —the holy of holy  
 and he knows  
 his ambitions  
 are generated by the world—  
 that up until this point  
 in his somewhat privileged learned life  
 he has kept  
 the sacred stashed in the corner—  
 pulling it out  
 for some solemn such moments.  
 But now—  
 the holy all around  
 it cannot be qualified or quantified,  
 limited or corralled.  
 Holy is everywhere.  
 And as he opens his eyes and looks up—  
 a seraph—approaches—  
 not one from the pictures or statues  
     — not rock or limestone  
     — but a holy messenger of God  
 comes near  
 —presses a coal against his lips  
 —and declares what he already knows in his bones—  
 “your guilt is gone-your sins are forgiven”  
 The tears pour down his face—  
 Carrying away the pain that is his no longer.

That’s when he hears the question—  
 from on high—  
 from all around—  
 for the sacred world  
     is no longer cordoned off—  
     shunted to the side—  
 He hears from inside  
 —outside—all around—  
 “Whom shall I send?  
     Who will Go?”  
 And he says,  
 pushing himself up off the ground,  
 “Here I am. Send me.”  
 For he has seen the Lord.  
 And the Holy is all around.

As it was then—  
as it is now—as it shall be.

We are all called to the Holy  
—for the Holy,  
as theologian Eugene Peterson says,  
“Is the most intense experience  
we ever get of sheer *life*—  
authentic, firsthand living,  
not life  
looked at and enjoyed from a distance.” (p 1199 *The Message*)

Peterson continues,  
“The book of Isaiah is expansive...  
The impressive art of Isaiah  
involves taking the stuff  
of our ordinary  
and often disappointing human experience  
and showing us  
how it is the very stuff  
that God uses to create  
and save  
and give hope.  
As this vast panorama  
opens up before us,  
it turns out that nothing  
is unusable by God. (Pp1199-1200 *The Message* ).

The Holy is all around.  
Our lives—  
all that we have—  
can be used by God  
to transform  
this frail, faltering world of ours.

But frequently,  
enmeshed in our own lives  
as we are—  
we need people—  
we need messengers from God  
to remind us  
that this is so.  
We need people to point out the holy.  
That’s where today’s service comes into play.  
Let’s be very clear.

I am not for a minute  
 suggesting that ordination  
 confers a special ability to notice holiness  
     upon Les or anyone of us.  
 Nor am I saying  
 that people who are ordained  
 are more holy than others.  
 After 19 years of ordained ministry  
 I know viscerally  
 that one's not true.  
 But what I am saying  
 —is we all need our Isaiah's.  
 We all need someone  
 who has had an experience of God  
 and who can pass it along—  
 call it forth in ourselves.

The Roman Catholic Theologian,  
 Henri Nouwen says,  
     "Ministry means  
       the ongoing attempt  
       to put one's own search for God,  
       with all the moments of pain and joy,  
       despair and hope,  
       at the disposal of those  
       who want to join this search  
       but do not know how." (Creative Ministry)

Les it is this  
 that you are being called to today.  
 I am here today  
 because I know you can do it.  
 I have seen you do this  
 and I have seen people's lives  
     touched and changed.

What I am thinking about most  
 was your very good work  
 in creating our Holy Monday service.  
 In 16 years  
 we'd never quite found anything  
 that was particularly compelling.  
 Tuesday night was the healing service,  
 Wednesday Tenebrae,  
 Maundy Thursday, Good Friday —we had all of those—  
 but Monday was unremarkable at best.

What you did  
—rather than create liturgy  
for liturgy sake—  
you realized a need—  
you saw a gaping hole.  
We offered a service of anointing on Tuesday  
—Brokenness in the world on Wednesday,  
Contrition on Good Friday—  
but what about our brokenness?  
What about our brokenness and personal sorrows?  
Brokenness before healing.

How might it all relate  
to Christ's brokenness  
that wretched week before he died?  
Those were the questions you dared to ask.

Those were the question  
you used  
as you invited people to tell their own stories.  
You gathered a group  
from the congregation to assist you.  
You created a place  
where the unvarnished truth  
could be spoken,  
you sat with people  
as they voiced their pain,  
never flinching or moving away.  
When some decided after working on their story—  
preparing to offer it in a intimate public way  
—that they really didn't want to.

That was fine,  
because it wasn't about  
the finished product of the worship service.  
It was about sitting with people  
long enough for them  
to say what really mattered.  
It was about listening  
to their life and pointing out God's holy hand  
—even in the course of extreme sadness and pain.  
In that moment in that service—  
you created  
an opportunity for people  
to tell their story

and place it  
 in the larger context  
 of brokenness and redemption of Holy week.  
 Anne's story of a lost friendship,  
 Another story of an abruptly ended relationship,  
 Beth's story of Emily's murder.  
 All told—all heard—  
 not as spectacle but as reality.  
 All heard, by you  
 and the congregation who gathered,  
 as extreme moments in time—  
 that were Holy  
     for God was all around.

Les (stand with me please)  
 —Ministry is, as Nouwen says,  
 “the ongoing attempt  
 to put one's own search for God,  
 with all the moments of pain and joy,  
 despair and hope,  
 at the disposal of those of us  
 who want to join this search—  
 but don't know where to begin.”  
 This is your gift—dear friend.

You are being called today—  
 to spend your life—  
 pointing out the Holy all around.  
 That is your call—that is your charism.  
 We need you  
 to help all of us see  
 God's Holy hand  
 in our world  
 so that we may all say,  
 “Here I am Lord—send me.”

Amen.

Love you.