

Ordination to the Priesthood of
The Rev. Holly Christine Clark

St. Alban's Church
Cape Elizabeth, Maine
December 13, 2018

Sermon
By The Rev. Luk De Volder
Rector of Trinity Church, New Haven, CT

Readings

Isaiah 6:1-8
Psalm 132:8-18
Ephesians 4:7, 11-16
John 10:11-18

Dear Bishop Stephen Taylor Lane,
Dear Rector Timothy Boggs,
Dear Members of St Alban's Vestry and parish,
Dear Family, Friends,
Dear Jonathan,
Dear Holly,

Dear Holly,
Tonight, we celebrate your ordination to the priesthood. And we are so glad to celebrate you, Holly.

Your ordination is a moment of advent light for all of us. It is a celebration of the Christ's priestly light coming and marking all of us with power of the Holy Spirit.

As we celebrate tonight the ordination to the priesthood of Holly Clark, we obviously are here physically. But may I invite you also spiritually into this mystery of faith, and say to you: please come closer, enter with your mind, join with your heart, into the mystery, which is the ancient term to express both the surpassing of understanding and yet real working of God's healing loving light of Christ in us, the Shepherd who lays down his life for you. Allow these metaphors to resonate and come into the poetry of this moment, the excess of meaning we all can sense tonight, for which we need a praying poet like Cummings to capture this:

around me surges a miracle of unceasing
birth and glory and death and resurrection:
over my sleeping self float flaming symbols
of hope, and i wake to a perfect patience of mountains

Right here right now.

With this poetry, I only seek to add some spice to our Christian celebration here tonight because I hope we all can sense how we are part of a Christ celebration of God's loving heart, with all its passion, with all its sincerity, with all its outpouring compassion. If I may say so, take a moment to see how in this visible sign of ordination we see the invisible grace of God - who

sees each one of us, who is here to honor and acknowledge and envelop you with all what matters in our lives, in our hearts.

We are so glad to celebrate your calling, Holly. Here at St. Alban's you all know so well what a blessed presence Holly brings. She came to you as a summer seminarian and you knew right away she is a keeper. Honestly at Trinity on the Green in New Haven, Connecticut, where I am rector, and where Holly as seminary intern left a stellar impression, we are jealous that you have her. But it is joyful jealousy.

As I am honored to preach tonight, as Rector of Trinity New Haven - my name is Luk De Volder - I am keenly aware that I am treading on holy ground. And it is with the utmost respect for Holly's calling and for your prayer life that I invite you to enter into the poetry of God's coming light. And while it may sound enchanting to talk about the matters of the heart and power of the advent light, this touches in fact also on a very down-to-earth dimension of our Christian life. Holly knows all too well what this advent journey of light and grace entails, how much work of the heart is involved to truly live up to the words "Here I am; send me". How many leaps of faith this has taken, how many growth challenges of trust this involved, including the apparent detours (the numerous trips between Maine and Connecticut), the confrontation with personal shortcomings - only to gradually discover - that in many cases - through God's grace - turned out opportunities of grace and service.

As you know very well by now, Holly, this journey of becoming a priest often feels like Jacob's wrestling with God and as if you are preparing to get a black belt in spiritual Taekwondo; feels like Isaiah's profound disorienting sensation of total unworthiness: "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a [person] of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips"; feels like dancing with wolves, like Kevin Costner, to protect the sheep, because churches don't really have a budget for a security detail.

As your bishop and many clergy friends well know, these experiences are not just about becoming a priest; they will always be part of priestly life. Because priesthood is an amazing adventure, impossible to capture in a movie. The movie would have to be a comedy, an action thriller, a tragedy and a divine comedy at the same time. The surprise factor is huge and sometimes tied up in funny details. Take for example a very simple detail of this evening: how could there be at Holly's ordination an originally Belgian Episcopalian priest to come to St. Alban's in Cape Elizabeth, on the 13th of December, the exact day he himself got ordained 21 years ago.

For an extra minute, I would like to highlight how adventurous and enlightening your priestly job and calling will be. Most of us are very well acquainted with the classic job description of a priest: obviously, you only work on Sundays, print the same bulletins every Sunday morning in the vesting room closet, right before the service. Yet, you are available 24/7 always ready to say yes to God's call, and people calling, whatever and whenever call, while you are a model of healthy boundaries. We all are familiar with this ironic yet often true depiction of priesthood. Tonight, however, I would like to highlight another dimension, how your priesthood is in so many ways an out of the ordinary job, because as priest you are operating with intangibles like light and grace, the art work of finding grace in everything when others cannot see it; the mission to bring love where there is hatred, peace where there is discord. It all sounds so

beautifying, but at the same time - if you ever gave this a try - you immediately could attest how this is so real, so tough and so joyful at the same time.

In this realm of invisibles, we, as clergy, stand on the border between humanity and divinity. You may have heard of thin places; in a sense clergy are thin people. We join people, poor or rich, new-born or dying, and attempt to lift the curtain of time so that the light of eternal life may break through.

winter by spring, i lift my diminutive spire to
merciful Him Whose only now is forever:
standing erect in the deathless truth of His presence
(welcoming humbly His light and proudly His darkness)

Priests are somewhat like midwives of this light who help to give birth to the biggest joys of life. Like zen-masters or monks at times who help people to regain balance after they tripped on their path. Priests are like poets who at times peel off that corner in the sky and help roll down the heavenly carpet of light to kindle joy amid the caves of sadness or rivers of strife. At those times my priestly life:

my life is the life of the reaper and the sower;
my prayers are prayers of earth's own clumsily striving
(finding and losing and laughing and crying) children
whose any sadness or joy is my grief or my gladness

As kindlers of joy priests stand in the old age - forgotten tradition of the curators of souls, poets of the spirit, Christ-servants of holy healing of the 'Self'. We stand in this advent mode and labor to disclose that precious light in each one of us, that light of life, from the beginning, that light that did shine into the world while the world was a formless void. And on the first day God spoke, let there be light. And there was light. But on the fourth day God created the Sun and the Moon and the Stars. So we pause at those foundations of the world for a second and ask, what light was God creating then on the first day? There is a longstanding rabbinic tradition stressing that there is that light of life that is alive in each one of us, that deep desire to live and thrive and bring goodness all around us. We all have it in us, but for myriad of reasons it gets sometimes stuck along the way, or the light loses the minimum oxygen to keep its flame burning, or is being trampled on by the takers in life. Whatever people's predicament is, as priest you and I am often standing on the crossroads of life, in the margins of humanity, try to rekindle the flame, a times I am even playing with fire, suspended in elastic mode in between human and divine, and you and I pray with the praying poet:

i am a little church (~~far from~~ [present in] the frantic
world with its rapture and anguish) at peace with nature
-i do not worry if longer nights grow longest;
i am not sorry when silence becomes singing

Here you are Holly: ready for the priesthood, that shows both God's redeeming light and voices the needs of humanity.

And so, on this most symbolic night,
where your past and future coincide,
and God and grace compassionately slide
in us, with majestic and tender might,
together with angels we enclose around you, Holly
and we all join and will sing Holy Holy.
It is as if there church were giving you
 a black belt in ministry,
as if tonight the Isaiah's Seraphs will open
 your mouth for prophetic clarity;
tonight the one Shepherd will say to you: guide my sheep.
And we will humbly stretch our hands
asking you: Please be a servant
of Christ light and every person's predicament;
Imploring boldly our God, to please mark and anoint,
you with God's Holy Spirit, firmly and bold
to strengthen, sanctify and protect your precious being.

e.e. cummings poem i am a little church

i am a little church (no great cathedral)
far from the splendor and squalor of hurrying cities
-i do not worry if briefer days grow briefest,
i am not sorry when sun and rain make april

my life is the life of the reaper and the sower;
my prayers are prayers of earth's own clumsily striving
(finding and losing and laughing and crying) children
whose any sadness or joy is my grief or my gladness

around me surges a miracle of unceasing
birth and glory and death and resurrection:
over my sleeping self float flaming symbols
of hope, and i wake to a perfect patience of mountains

i am a little church (far from the frantic
world with its rapture and anguish) at peace with nature
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