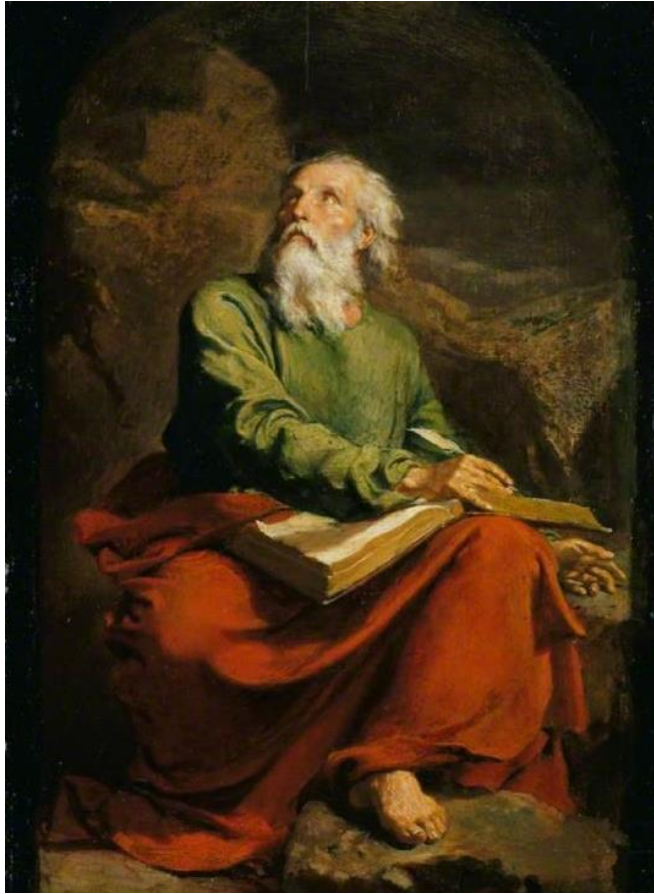


Hear am I, Lord, send me!



The scroll of the Prophet Isaiah 6:8 "Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, 'Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?' And I said, 'Here am I; send me!'

It is hard for me to imagine at times, that it has been almost 45 years since I lay prostrate on the chancel floor of the historic Church of the Advent in Boston, awaiting the moment of my ordination to the priesthood, having just heard that very reading from the Prophet Isaiah, while beautiful choral anthems rose amidst the incense, and me, with cowboy boots upon my feet.

I answered that call just as Isaiah did, 'here am I, Lord, send me!' and my life as a priest has amazed me ever since. Today I thank God for that. For I have served the Anglican Church now in four countries and eleven dioceses. I have lived amidst the Brahmins on Beacon Hill and in a cabin deep in the woods of New Hampshire, in an English flat in Oxford along the River Thames and in a cottage on Cape Cod, in the nurses' quarters of Montreal General Hospital and in the servants' quarters of an ancient Chateau in Belgium, with a real Count and Countess occupying the main house, with whose children my children once played. I have often been amazed or just amused at how I got here, or what in God's name I was thinking so many years ago. For in God's service, I have seen the world. I have visited the Holy Land and the capitals of Europe. I have traveled to Spain and Portugal and Italy and Russia among others. I have visited the Greek Isles and Morocco. I have walked through the spice market in Istanbul, and I bought a fez at the souk in Tangiers. I don't know how all of this happened. I don't know how all of this could have happened, without the hand of God.

For I was born into an average lower middle-class white neighborhood in Houston, Texas. My father proudly wore his high school all his life as a matter of pride at graduating. There was nothing particularly remarkable about my childhood, except that my mother spoke with an accent, and I didn't. My mother was

from Australia; she was a war bride. My father joined the US Navy, as so many others did on the day after Pearl Harbor. He joined the Navy, he always said, because they shoot at the ship and not at you. As a more mature sailor, he was sent to work at the Navy warehouses in Brisbane, Australia, where my mother worked for the US Navy because they paid more than the Australian Navy, she said. After the war, they returned to my father's home in Springfield, New Jersey, and were married and lived in the same house with my father's mother and sister. My dad returned to his job at the Prudential Life Insurance Company, who soon decided that they were going to transfer him and that he had the choice between Chicago, where my dad remembered the icy wind blowing down the lake right through his Navy peacoat, or Houston, Texas, an unknown part of the world to him. He chose the latter, so that my two sisters and I are all native-born Texans, though we never talked like one.

Just before my Senior Year in High School, my parents moved out to the distant northern suburbs of Houston where there were many new houses being built, for my father by that time had become a home builder. We lived in a trailer for a year while my father built our family dream home in a new subdivision that went bust a couple of years later with only four homes completed. My mother had her first heart attack just after Christmas that year in the trailer. She never worked again, and

her health slowly deteriorated over the next seven years, the very years I was away at college and seminary. The week before my ordination to the diaconate in June 1980, my mother in her bed and I at her side went over the ordination program together. I admired the two dresses my father had chosen for her for the occasion. I reassured her that there were wheelchairs and even oxygen at the back of the church if needed. We were excited about the event. The next morning, I heard my dad call up the stairs to get me up as usual, but there was something frantic about his voice. I rushed downstairs to find that my mother had collapsed, and my father was performing CPR. It was my job to wait outside for the ambulance, which seemed to take forever. I remember driving our car to the hospital behind the ambulance and being struck about how the world around me seemed to be going on as though nothing had happened. Upon arrival at the hospital, my younger sister and I were informed that my mother had died. So, that I walked down the very same church aisle for her funeral that exactly a week later I walked down to be ordained a deacon.

While my older sister was more of a conformist at Baylor University where both my sisters and I went to college, I was more a rebel. I grew my hair long, started to drink beer, and majored in Philosophy. I climbed higher and higher into the ivory towers and became more and more critical of anyone or any

group which thought they had all the answers. Then in the spring of 1974, I wandered into St. Alban's Episcopal Church in Waco, Texas. To this day I am not sure exactly what it was that drew me there that morning, but as soon as I had entered the nave, I knew that I was captured by a Presence there. I was spellbound by that moment, by the flickering of the sanctuary lamp amidst the quiet shadows about the altar, by the smell of flowers and polished wood, by the sound of hushed voices and whispered prayers. I seemed to recognize the place, though I had never been there before. It seemed to me so inviting, so familiar, like a place I once knew but had long since forgotten. It felt like home. It was a place to be in the presence of God. Not to think about God or to speak about God or worse yet, to argue about God, but simply to be present with God. I didn't want to ever leave that place.

So, in September of 1975 during my junior year at Baylor, I made an appointment to see my priest, the Reverend Everett Harrison Cain, Jr. a tall, white, soft-spoken, gentle man, who was everything that a priest should be in my eyes, and who was everything that I was not. I went to tell him that I felt called by God to the priesthood, although I really knew very little about what that meant at the time, and maybe that was for the best. I quietly put my life in his hands, and upon retrospect, I have to wonder what on earth he was thinking of me. Here was a

member of his congregation with whom he had never spoken except for a few words at the church door upon leaving. I had never held a position in any church, or served on any parish committee, or volunteered for any outreach activity, or even served as an acolyte. I was and still am a very shy and timid person. I used to stand and read the Vestry Minutes on the bulletin board at Coffee Hour, if I went at all, because I was too afraid to talk to anyone. Moreover, at the time of that interview, I was also a very skinny, long-haired, vegetarian, most often barefooted, Philosophy major. Yet he was kind and gentle with me, and single-handedly arranged the approval of his Vestry and my two meetings with the Bishop. My Rector seemed impressed that I was paying my own way through college. I can think of nothing else. At my second meeting with the Bishop, I was told beforehand that the Bishop interviewed 20 or so candidates a year, picked only a few and sent them to Seminary. At the end of our conversation, I remember the Bishop strangely asking whether I had any problem with Virginia, to which I said no, since I didn't know what he was talking about, and to which he replied, then it's settled. And so it was, I was to be sent to Virginia Seminary in Alexandria, just as all five previous bishops of Texas had been. At times, I simply do not understand how I got to where I am, except by the grace of God.

For Spring Break of my Senior year at Seminary in 1980, I went to the Cowley Fathers monastery in Cambridge, Massachusetts. I got to know them the summer before when I worked as a Seminarian intern at the Church of the Advent in Boston. That had been a terrible summer for me. The previous Rector had died suddenly. The Associate Rector was the Interim and the favorite of many for the position, but not the favorite of those in power. There was a lot of tension and fighting and bickering and secrecy in the congregation, and I hated it. Yet during that Spring Break, I went across the river to see the Secretary who had been so kind to me the summer before. While in the Parish Office, I ran into the Interim who invited me into his office, said that he had been trying to reach me at the seminary, and offered me a job upon graduation. There was no way in hell that I wanted to go back there, but I didn't want to say that, so I reminded him that I was from the Diocese of Texas, and we were not free agents, for the bishop would assign us where we were to go after graduation. Still, I encouraged the Interim to write a letter of request though, because I thought it would look good that a place I had worked at wanted me. A month before I graduated from Seminary, the Bishop of Texas died from a long struggle with cancer. The Standing Committee didn't know what to do with the graduating seniors and had more important things to worry about, and there was this letter from

the Advent in my files. So, they assigned me to Boston without ever even talking to me. I was horrified by the news.

In the end though, it was the most formative thing that ever happened to me in my professional career. The Advent had just called their new Rector, a Scottish priest named Richard Holloway, a popular author of many religious books and a regular religious commentator on the BBC. Richard Holloway helped me become the priest that I am today. His wife, Jean, was a second mother after the loss of my own. I spent four years at the Advent, and when by chance, I decided to go to Oxford University thereafter, Richard was at that same time called to be Vicar of Mary Mag's in Oxford, so that I served as Richard's curate for another two years there, until he was elected Bishop of Edinburgh, and later the Primate of Scotland. Still, it seemed like such an accident to me that our fates ever became so entwined. Other acts of fate soon followed suit, like the one that brought me here.

Such is the nature, I believe, of following our call from God, of being open to God's presence in our lives. For God, I believe, is calling unto each of us. That call doesn't always make sense to us at the time, or lead us where we thought we wanted to go. But with faith in God, it can lead us to joy and fulfillment. And I wish that for each of you in your vocations. Amen.