

Sermon for the Ordination to the Priesthood of  
Rev. Barbara Ballenger and the Rev. Laura Palmer  
December 13, 2019  
The Rev. Emily Richards

*Here Am I*

Beloved of God in the Community of all the Baptized, Bishop Gutierrez, Bishop Griswold, fellow clergy and friends we gather here on this most auspicious night, to celebrate and pray for the Rev. Barbara Ballenger and the Rev. Laura Palmer as they are graced with the gift of ordained priesthood in the Episcopal Church. It is with great delight that I join you in bearing witness to the wondrous things our God is doing through them. Our deep gratitude goes to Jarrett, Anne, Carol and all the good people of St. Martin's for your kindness in welcoming us among you. I am especially grateful to you for raising up Laura and Barb for this ministry, for your unceasing encouragement and care, and for all of you gathered here, Laura and Barb's family and friends who have accompanied them along their journeys and guided them to this the glorious and awe-filled moment!

On another auspicious occasion centuries ago, a young prophet "saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. And this young man with unclean lips living among a people of unclean lips proclaims, "Here am I. Send me." I've always imagined Isaiah to be a bit humble and awestruck in response to the grand vision before him. Crouching next to a shaking and smoking column, looking over his right shoulder and then over his left hoping to find someone else, anyone else, who might be there to step up. Only seven other times in Hebrew Scriptures is this particular word, *Hineini* used. We hear it when Abraham prepares for the sacrifice of His son, Moses comes upon the burning bush, and Samuel agrees to take up the mantle of leadership. Here am I. Words of complete vulnerability. A posture of being fully present in the moment, and of radical trust in the Holy One's invitation.

Maybe it's because we are journeying through the season of Advent or maybe because we are here to affirm the vocations of two very courageous and unflappable women that as I read again the story of Isaiah's commissioning I heard Mary's words to Gabriel: "Here

am I, the servant of the Lord. Let it be done with me; according to your word." A young, peasant girl as unlikely a recipient of God's call as any of her foremothers or forefathers whose stories she knew well. Seeped in Isaiah's ancient promises, she understood what the sudden appearance of an otherworldly messenger might entail. God's audacious plan to become one of us in human flesh was only matched by Mary's audacious yes to partner with God in the work of bearing God's incarnate love into the world. "Meek and mild? Submissive? No, not Mary. Because God is not meek and mild. And God does not choose the meek and mild to do the unimaginable. God chooses the unconventional, unexpected way, an un-wed, un-believed teenage girl with the holy task of birthing, nursing, and nurturing the Son of God," declared Rachel Held Evans. There must've been many moments of fear and wonder along the way, each one requiring from her another yes to the holy task she had been given – another gutsy declaration of Hear am I. Let it be..."

In her poem, *After Annunciation*, Madeleine L'Engle writes,

*This is the irrational season*

*When love blooms bright and wild.*

*Had Mary been filled with reason*

*There'd have been no room for the child.*

Barb and Laura, we gather here to affirm your bold and risky yes to God and God's call for you and our Church. Had you been filled with reason Barb you might not have ventured forth into an unfamiliar religious landscape to experience afresh Jesus' love for you and belief in you. Had you been filled with reason, you might not have shown up in Jarrett's office and said I am called to the priesthood and I am looking for a community that will walk this journey with me. Had you not been filled with reason Laura, you might not have walked into that strange Episcopal Church, received the sacrament and left there feeling that everything in your life was different. Had you been filled with reason you might not have dashed off an application to Union Theological Seminary for a program in religion and psychiatry which eventually led you to your ministry at CHOP. Had you both been filled with reason, when those doors kept closing, you might not have stood firm, declaring, "Here I am. Send me."

Barb and Laura, you find yourselves standing at the threshold of something new. The priesthood is a liminal space where you will dwell as God's servant. Whether you are

celebrating the Eucharist at God's holy table or pouring water over the head of a precious child and marking her as Christ's own forever or sitting at the bedside of a dying parishioner witnessing their final journey into new life in Christ, you will be standing on holy ground. At the threshold, inviting your sisters and brothers to dwell with you in the nearness of God. Welcoming Christ into the midst of your people and beckoning him to make all things new.

The priesthood will break open your heart to the beauty and the suffering of humanity. Through this ministry you will find yourself weeping at the foot of the cross and then running from the empty tomb with jubilation to tell others what you've seen and heard. It will lead you into the unfathomable goodness of God's creation; and fill you with unspeakable joy, emboldening you to be bearers of Christ's light in a world hungry for his mercy, justice and peace. It will humble you, inspire you, infuriate you, confound you and bless you beyond all measure. And at its most authentic, your priesthood among God's beloved will take your breath away.

In Gail Godwin's novel *Evensong* one of her characters says: "Your vocation is something that keeps making more of you." What a gift and a privilege, my sisters, to be counted as one of your companions on this journey. I pray that through the grace of God and with the support of your brothers and sisters in Christ, your vocation to the priesthood will keep making more of you. Neither Mary nor Isaiah knew what their call meant for them or how it was going to turn out; and yet they said yes, and kept on saying yes, continuing to place their unfailing trust in God's promises. As we travel the road to Bethlehem, inspired by Laura and Barb's witness and encouraged by the ancient stories of the young maiden and prophet, may we too stand at the threshold and declare: Here am I. *Amen.*