

Malcolm Clemens Young
Grace Cathedral, San Francisco, CA 2A11
Evensong #38 Venerable Order of St. John 5:15 p.m.
Thursday 27 February 2020 Ordination Anniversary (25 Years)

Psalms 25:1-9
Genesis 9:8-17
Mark 1:9-15

The Spirit Descending

"And immediately he saw the heavens opened and the Spirit descending upon him like a dove..." (Mk. 1).

Waiting for jury duty this week a new friend asked me why I got ordained. It is the most obvious question, and that I didn't feel ready to answer shows that I've been spending a great deal of time with people who already know me here. But the short answer to his question is that I am deeply, unequivocally, incurably in love with God. I want to know about God, read about God, hear people's experience of God, encounter God myself, all the time.

This is true every day, but over the years, that point of contact seems to grow stronger and more steady. I was ordained a priest at this time of day exactly twenty-five years ago. It feels like yesterday. I spent that afternoon walking and praying in the green Berkeley Hills as a Pacific storm swept through the Golden Gate. Then in that warm redwood chapel, St. Clement's Church, where I had gone to church in college, with everyone there – my family, friends from middle school every stage of my life, I knelt on the red carpet. All the assembled clergy put their hands on my shoulders. Afterwards old retired priests asked me for my blessing. It was a day filled with moments when heaven opened up and the spirit descended like a dove.

At that point I had no idea what I was getting into. Since then I've felt God's spirit descend in so many ways. It happened we taught children Christmas carols at pageant rehearsals, after sleeping on the marble floors of St. Paul's Cathedral in Boston for a youth group event, while keeping vigil at Stanford Hospital with an old Marine veteran and then with a twenty year old girl. The weddings and baptisms have been magical. I remember the first board meeting of the little school we started, playing the clarinet in the church band, the hospitals, prisons, courtrooms, government offices and schools I visited on official church business. 1300 ordinary Sundays were transformed because every Sunday is a feast of our Lord.

Bill Countryman, the retired New Testament professor at our Berkeley seminary says that a priest is anyone who points out what God is doing and draws our attention to the love of Jesus. He goes on to say that even people who would never consider getting ordained do work that is priestly.

He writes, "By priest I mean any person who lives in the dangerous, exhilarating, life-giving borderlands of human existence, where the everyday experience of life opens up to reveal glimpses of the HOLY – and not only lives there but comes to the aid of others living there."¹

At that time and over the years I continue to take great pleasure that today is the feast day of the poet and country parson George Herbert (1593-1633). I delight in his poems and in his whole approach to the spiritual life. In that time of intense political and religious conflict leading up to the English Civil War, George Herbert continued to emphasize that beauty matters, that God can be experienced in simple things, that worship is the way to finding and fulfilling our true self. "He writes "All things are of God... and have God in them and he them in himself likewise."²

We sing as a hymn George Herbert's poem "The Call." The last stanza goes like this "Come, my Joy, my Love, my Heart: / Such a Joy, as none can move: / Such a Love, as none can part: / Such a heart, as joys in love."³

But George Herbert also said, "The country parson preacheth constantly, the pulpit is his joy and his throne."⁴ With this in mind I better stop. But before I do let me implore you to fall in love with God. Look around. See the spirit descending on you. And every day in prayer, in acts of mercy and kindness, walk more deeply into the divine mystery.

¹ L. William Countryman, *Living on the Border of the Holy: Renewing the Priesthood of All Believers* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 1999) xi.

² "All things that are of God (and only sin is not) have God in them and he them in himself likewise." George Herbert, *The Country Parson, The Temple* ed. John N. Wall (NY: Paulist Press, 1981) xv.

³ *Ibid.*, 281.

⁴ *Ibid.*, xiii.