

Loving and Leaving a Church

A Pastor's Journey

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INTRODUCTION

This is a story of saints and sinners—according to Luther, that’s what we all are—and the story of Saints and Sinners, the small, blue-collar congregation in Baltimore where I learned how to be a pastor. When I arrived, they had been in decline for forty years, living off a dwindling legacy. When I left, the congregation was smaller still, and still struggling. So this isn’t a success story—at least not a conventional one—but it’s the story of many congregations today.

I went there aspiring to change them.

I knew better; really I did. But I fell for it anyway, fell hard for my own fantasies of rescue. I would be the one who would turn them around, reversing decades of decline. Like Pollyanna in the old movie, I’d roll up my sleeves and sweep away the dust of stale habit. I’d scrub the begrimed windows and hang prisms in them, so the sun would scatter sparks of light and color over the worn floors.

Instead, they changed me.

Long-suffering to a fault, they taught me patience. Unimpressed by my education and my credentials, they schooled me in humility. They drove me crazy and made me laugh. They moved me to tears

and, some days, bored me to tears. They resented me and ignored me, tested and suffered me, accepted and loved me.

They called me “pastor,” and among them, I became one.

As their pastor, I had a place in a community to which I otherwise did not belong. Compared to them, I was a rolling stone, roving from place to place to take advantage of educational opportunity or professional advancement. They stayed in place, deeply rooted in the neighborhood around the church and enmeshed in extended family. My membership in their tribe was provisional—by vocation, not birthright. The people of Saints and Sinners regarded me as the alien I was, and they trusted me anyway.

I baptized their children, witnessed their marriage promises, visited them in hospitals and nursing homes, gathered with them at funeral homes, and stood with them at the open graves of our beloved dead. With them I shared the push and tug of life together, with its misunderstandings and petty grievances and well-nourished grudges. I stood with them in the river of their pain and joy, with its undertow of unspoken resentment and anger and its deep currents of betrayal and grief, love and loyalty. We hurt one another and forgave one another and learned to love one another.

Yes, I devised to change them. I searched tirelessly for the latest church-growth program, glittering with promises of transformation. I visited these schemes upon the Saints with a zeal that left them bemused. I cajoled and encouraged, exhorted and hectored. Sometimes, I managed to convince a few people to follow the charge into congregational renewal. A few times, we got some traction: new members, new projects, new energy. But then the setbacks would send us slipping back. An enthusiastic newcomer would move away; a new council would rise up in rebellion; we’d be blindsided by a leak in the roof or a cold winter that sent the oil bill soaring or saw yet another boiler failure. I held on, at first with grit and determination, and eventually with a tenacity fueled by pride and delusion.

On the face of it, Saints and Sinners was a place where almost nothing seemed to happen. It seemed that way to me, sometimes. I writhed with frustration at the glacial pace of congregational life. I mounted campaign after campaign: leadership training,

congregational renewal, transformational ministry. Most of them met a slow but certain death, dispatched by the congregation's vast indifference. Once in a while, something hit a nerve, and only then would the slumbering assembly rise as one to banish the threat of change.

The Saints loved their church, and they gave extravagantly of their time and their money and their very selves. But they loved the church as it was. Even more, they loved the church they had lost, the congregation of the early 1960s—the glory days. I burned to lead them into new life. They longed for restoration to their former glory, the bygone church whose image became ever more bur-nished with every passing year. They knew that church was gone forever, but they held on like death to what they had cherished. They understood what I denied, at first. Change is death.

I knew they were right about the costs of change—or I should have known. I had become a pastor because I was looking for a whole new life. To find it, I had to let go of the one I had. Along the way, I had wandered far from home. I had left behind the work I had known and loved, to become a beginner again. Then I left the community where I belonged, to become a stranger and sojourner with the Saints.

Call it a midlife crisis, or late midlife. Or call it the hound of heaven, in hot pursuit. Or the Holy Spirit, blowing me into a new life. Or call it surrender. Centuries before, Augustine, another wayward pilgrim, had written, “God, you have made us for your-self, and our hearts are restless till they find their rest in you.”

By the late 1990s I had been a professor for nearly twenty years when a kind of restlessness began to overtake me: boredom with familiar routines, a growing impatience with my colleagues and my students and, most of all, myself. Then, under it all, an echoing emptiness, and a feeling I wasn't in the right place anymore. When I thought about keeping on for another fifteen or twenty years, I felt something like despair. But tenured positions are hard to come by, and people don't usually leave them. When they do, they don't usually become pastors. If you had told me years ago that this would happen to me, I would have laughed.

A pastor? I was hardly even a Christian.

I had grown up in church, but I'd left church and stayed out for some twenty years. "Unchurched." For months, sometimes years, I didn't even think about going to church. Yet something kept drawing me back—a longing I couldn't quite name or quell. I'd creep into the back of some church for a single Sunday, or several Sundays, for a month, a season, or even a year. And then I'd stop going for reasons I could name or for no reason at all, leaving church again.

I grew up in a Lutheran church; people like me are sometimes called "cradle Lutherans"—though I'm not sure I count as one, with those twenty years of wandering. I went to a dozen or so churches over those years, not all of them Lutheran. But when I joined a church again, it was a Lutheran church, and I became a Lutheran pastor. I think it was no accident that I returned to the place I'd begun. Lutheran theology challenges my intellect, fires my imagination, opens my heart. It fits me like a strand of DNA locking into its matching strand.



This is my story of Saints and Sinners, and I have tried to stay true to what I know—to tell my own story, and to recognize what I do not know and cannot know about the stories of others. Inevitably, though, my story involves and discloses the lives of others. I have tried to respect their stories by telling the truth as well as I know it. I include dialogue only when I wrote it down close to the time I heard or spoke it. In order to protect the privacy of others, I have sometimes changed identifying details, but I have not rearranged events, invented characters, or presented composites of people or places.

Pastors have the honor of sharing people's lives at profound and intimate moments. That trust is sustained by discretion and care, and pastors are bound by a code of confidentiality that does not end when a call ends. I've disguised some situations that appear here. In accounts where the events and participants are likely recognizable, I've talked with those involved. I use Amy's story, the most extended and intimate of these, with her family's gracious permission.

Most of the names in this book are pseudonyms. In this age of Internet search, these provide only light disguises, if any. But I

have chosen this renaming as a way of reminding myself and readers that this story is shaped by the teller. Inevitably, others represented here may not agree with the way I have portrayed them, or myself, or the experiences we shared. From those who disagree with my account, I ask forbearance. From those I have hurt, I ask forgiveness.

Memory is a notorious trickster. Recent neuroscience confirms that which we knew all along: that we invent our stories as soon as we tell them, even to ourselves. Nonetheless, I have been formed as a writer by my first vocation as a historian, and I have tried hard to write an accurate account. As I found myself in the curious position of researching my own life, I relied on a variety of sources. I've mined volumes of journals, kept more or less continuously since I was nineteen years old. This kind of personal writing is itself shaped by selection and emotion, but it offers the advantage of a written record and reflection set down closer to the events. I've consulted years of datebooks that helped me reconstruct a timeline of events and that documented the rhythms and activities of my days.

Letters from friends and an important mentor, Thomas R. Swears, provided some insight into my own state of mind at different points. Since 1998, when we met at a ministry-formation event at Gettysburg, I've maintained a correspondence with Laura Lincoln. Until 2012 we wrote each another every month with few exceptions; her letters document our paths through ministry and reveal the struggles and texture of my years with the Saints. I've also consulted friends and relatives for their memories of events.

The paper trail left by candidacy and seminary work has helped me reconstruct other parts of this story. In particular, I've made use of the reflective writing taught in clinical pastoral education. The verbatim is a description of a pastoral encounter done close to the event, in which the writer is challenged to observe closely and record as fully and accurately as possible. Those accounts preserved the immediacy and intensity of that experience, and honed skills of observation and reflection that served me well as a pastor and as a writer.

Emotional truth is another matter. I've tried to keep myself honest to that too. Whether or not I have succeeded, only God knows.

CHAPTER 1

UNEQUIPPED

“Barbara, you are not equipped.” The preacher looked straight at me and paused to let it sink in. I felt flooded with relief to hear it said out loud. I was about to be ordained as a Lutheran pastor, and I knew with dreadful certainty that I wasn’t up to it. Tom, my pastor and beloved mentor, continued with his stark advisory. Not equipped to preach and teach. Not equipped to care for God’s people. Not equipped to bear witness. Not equipped to serve as an example of holy living. I had to restrain myself from nodding like a bobblehead doll.

He turned to face the little group of people who had come from Saints and Sinners in Baltimore. Ordained today, I would be starting my ministry with them in exactly one week. They sat together off to one side, looking uncomfortable in this unfamiliar church, Good Shepherd in Wilmington, Delaware, where Gary and I were members. They looked at their feet as Tom informed them that they had just called a pastor who was not equipped for the job. And they were not equipped, either, to be the congregation they were supposed to be. We would disappoint one another and hurt one another, he warned. Like a marriage, this relationship could not be sustained by good feelings and good intentions alone;

those would be forgotten soon enough. We would have to practice patience and forbearance and forgiveness.

Unequipped.

I stood up to make the promises I was not equipped to keep. The bishop loomed over me, his face red and shiny with sweat over his heavy brocade robe. He read each charge and then looked over his glasses, pausing for my response: "I will, and I ask God to help me." Then his face broke into a broad smile as he waved my clergy colleagues forward to surround me for laying on of hands. They surged out of the front rows, red stoles festive over their crisp white robes. I knelt and they moved in close around me. I felt the heat of their bodies in the tight circle, then the pressure of their hands on my head, my shoulders, my arms and back, until I felt almost crushed with the weight of all their blessing. Finally, as I stood again before him, the bishop spread his arms wide and declared, "Let it be acclaimed that Barbara Melosh is ordained a minister in the church of Christ!"



The very next Sunday I would be standing at the altar of Saints and Sinners, raising the cup and bread to bless Communion for the first time. It had been years in coming—decades, if you counted my years out of church and then my slow, stuttering return. Then five and a half years of seminary, fitted into what was already a full-time life. I'd stayed on as a professor even as I'd become a part-time student too. I'd finished my course work at seminary in December, gotten the last round of approvals for ordination, and finally taken the plunge to retire from the university. Then there had been months of uncertainty, as I waited for a place to practice my new profession.

University colleagues and friends kept asking me how the job search was going. I had to keep explaining there was no job search. Instead, I'd been accepted into the call process. That meant I'd been assigned to one of the fifty-some Lutheran bishops in the United States. To my relief I'd landed in my home synod; it could have been anywhere. Our bishop was in charge of the next step, matching me up with a congregation. Would-be pastors were strictly forbidden

to seek out congregations on their own, and congregations too had to wait for candidates proposed by the bishop. And the bishops weren't just employment brokers; the language of "call" affirmed that we were all working under divine direction. Connected to one another as "church," we didn't make these decisions alone, but shared a process of discernment—a word with an ancient pedigree. It meant finding the way forward through prayer, reflection, consultation, and conversation, a process guided by . . . well, we averred it was the Holy Spirit. For pastors and congregations, "call" affirmed that our relationship was more than a contract between employee and employer. We were joined by a covenant, pledging to support one another for the sake of the ministry we shared.

Marian, the assistant to the bishop (or matchmaker), met with me to discuss the congregations I could consider. One of them was Saints and Sinners, a small, struggling congregation about a mile from Baltimore's Inner Harbor. What had once been a busy commercial center around the port had become a deteriorating zone overrun with drug dealers and crime. In the last twenty years the Inner Harbor had become a thriving tourist destination and retail emporium, and the blocks of row houses nearby had become newly attractive to affluent residents. Now real estate agents and developers were eyeing the adjoining neighborhood around Saints and Sinners, and their longtime blue-collar community was becoming a desirable destination for younger, more affluent, more transient people.

I felt an uptick of interest. Many of these newcomers were Gen Xers, young adults who were the subjects of much ecclesial scrutiny and strategizing. Mostly "unchurched" but often self-declared seekers, "spiritual but not religious," they were the mission field of our time, and my people! Granted, I was no longer unchurched and no longer young, but I had a long resume as a seeker. As a professor I was used to being around young adults and knew something of their struggles and aspirations. Maybe I could be a bridge between this congregation and the new neighbors around them.

I did feel a flicker of alarm as Marian described their recent history. The congregation had nearly closed, and more than once. Their profile registered the weariness of long decline. Queried about their activities, they had written, "We have had to sharply

focus our cumulative energies towards keeping our doors open,” and “Again, we have been through a struggle for mere survival.” Invited to list their successes over the last thirty years, they responded, “Keeping the church doors open despite the hard times.” When the questionnaire directed, “Identify three congregational mission goals for your congregation for the next five years,” they listed one: “To stay open!” Whatever else could be said for them, they knew how to stay on message. Getting them to widen that focus, I guessed, might be a formidable task. Would they be on board for it? I noted uneasily too that two out of their last three pastors had gone down in flames.

I felt filled with misgivings, and I could well imagine they would feel the same about me. They had told Marian they wanted a young man. Their most recent pastor had been fresh out of seminary like me, but without a twenty-year detour from church or a career in godless academe. He’d moved into the parsonage with his young bride, and they’d promptly delighted the congregation with one child and then a second. The Saints had been stunned and bereft when he left after three and a half years.

Gary and I undertook a stealth reconnaissance. The next Saturday morning we cruised down the interstate, about an hour-and-a-half drive from our home in Wilmington. The exit near Saints and Sinners sent us onto a wide street pocked with potholes and lined with small row houses. The streetscape was drab under the overcast October sky, with only a few scraggly trees to break up the brown and gray and dull red of buildings, sidewalk, and pavement. I noticed the bars on almost every corner, along with a couple of pizza places, a barber shop with a red and blue striped pole, and an ice cream parlor with Erline’s Beauty Shop on the second floor. A battered sign marked an American Legion post, with a matching VFW hangout across the street.

A block away from the church, Gary backed into an empty space. I had been counting on urban anonymity, but as I slammed the car door shut and zipped up my jacket, I saw we had already been sighted. Behind a screen door an older woman stood observing us, her expression guarded. Her hair was in rollers, and she wore a faded housedress. I smiled and offered a half-wave. She looked back at me, unsmiling, then stepped back and shut the

door. I was jarred by this unfriendly reception, but told myself that if most of the neighbors were this vigilant, I'd be safe walking around alone at night.

Saints and Sinners was across the street, a redbrick building with a steep slate roof topped with a cross. A wrought-iron gate enclosed a wide slate porch; a marble planter in front of it was inscribed "The Manse," nineteenth-century parlance for parsonage. It was attached to the church itself, I saw. If I came here, I wouldn't even have to go outside to get to work. That would be a welcome relief after years of arduous commutes. Or would it? Suddenly I was remembering tales recounted by veterans of parsonage living: property committees balking at repairs; members banging at the door at all hours, or even using their keys to walk in uninvited. Just about every story of parsonage life included the one-word summation: fishbowl.

On the corner of the building an aluminum-framed marquee held a signboard declaring "A Warm Welcome Awaits You Here." Next to it was the church door, heavy oak with ornate wrought-iron hinges. Beyond it we saw a metal door propped open. On the sidewalk, a hand-lettered poster on a rickety sandwich board read "Country Bingo." Whatever that was, it didn't seem to be drawing a crowd. Not many people were out on this blustery morning. A jogger in electric-blue spandex trotted past the door, and a young woman in sweatpants walked by without glancing at the sign. I was tempted to peek inside, but we were already on forbidden territory; I couldn't risk an encounter with congregation members who might remember later that I had been snooping around. So we ducked around to the other side of the building, the better to scope out the manse.

It was an imposing building, its red brick trimmed with peach-tinted marble, and by far the grandest house in the neighborhood. Marian had declared it the nicest parsonage in the synod, with seven bedrooms and hardwood floors throughout. I was eager to get a peek. But as we crept around the building, we found mini blinds shuttering every window. Checking out the exterior, we saw that the congregation wasn't quite keeping up with maintenance. Most of the basement windows at street level were cracked, glass held in place with duct tape. On the back side of the parsonage, the window trim and eaves were covered with curls of

badly peeling paint. The brick wall that ran along the alley had planters built into the top, filled with tangles of dried weeds. Three battered trash cans were crowded onto the porch. And alas, no parking space. I would be trawling for spaces with the rest of the neighborhood.

Having lurked as long as we dared, we crossed the street to explore the large park that faced the church. We discovered an Olympic-size pool drained for the season and, tucked into one side of the park, a basketball court with broken pavement. The back side of the park held a soccer field bordered with nets next to a baseball diamond. Railroad tracks formed the back boundary of the park, and beyond them, cars and trucks droned by on an elevated stretch of the interstate. This area was secluded, shielded from the main street by the hill that crested in the middle of the park. It might be sketchy at night, I thought with a twinge of disquiet. There was some trash blowing around, and the trees were festooned with ragged plastic bags. But someone was clearly attending to upkeep too; freshly painted metal trash cans had been placed along the paths, and some well-tended shrubs and plants were growing in raised beds. A little sign next to one of them read “Friends of Wayside Park.”

My nose twitched with an odd, acrid odor. On the far side of the park, we discovered the source: a playground with a badly charred climbing structure and a partly melted molded plastic slide. Whoever had done this was no friend of Wayside Park, or of the Friends of Wayside Park. We stood there uneasily for a moment, speculating on what the park revealed about the neighborhood. It bore the marks of heavy use and of some neglect, along with determined renovation—and this trashed playground seemed like a disturbing sign that not everyone welcomed the changes.

We headed down a side street to check out the rest of the neighborhood. Built close to the sidewalks, some of the row houses were unpainted brick; many were covered with gray siding molded to resemble stone. Gary recognized it as Formstone, a patented siding popular in the late 1940s and 1950s; Baltimore was known for it. Many of the Formstone-covered houses had displays of artificial

flowers in the street-level windows, with aluminum chairs set on the sidewalk; the brick houses had pots outside their front doors, filled with chrysanthemums and pansies.

The sun had come out, and on just about every block someone was out on the sidewalk with a circular saw, working on some home-improvement project. Many houses had building permits displayed in the windows. A few had been gutted, their brick facades punched with cutouts for windows. On others, rooftop decks were under construction, some of them multilevel structures accessed by vertiginous-looking metal steps. The more recently renovated houses all had brick fronts; it seemed that newcomers were shedding the signature Formstone. These changes signaled a neighborhood on the upswing. But I wondered how longtime residents felt about the newcomers who were tearing off the siding that an earlier generation had deemed an improvement. And those rooftop decks—how did they register with neighbors who sat on their front steps to escape the heat?

More than siding was being replaced in the neighborhood. We noticed a large stone church building with arched windows and crossed the street to read the marquee next to the wide wooden door. There was nothing posted on it, though, and then we saw the mail slots; the building now housed apartments or condos. I looked up to the circle of stained-glass above us, facing east. It had probably lighted the altar when the place housed a congregation. Saints and Sinners had nearly closed a few years ago, and suddenly I imagined its brick and marble building divided up for condos, the developers enticing prospective buyers with “Hardwood floors, views of the park, stained-glass windows in many units!” I felt a swell of indignation on behalf of Saints and Sinners, surprising myself; I hadn’t even met these people yet, let alone cast my lot with them.

My stomach was rumbling, and my feet hurt. We spotted a corner bar ahead and consulted the menu—pub fare updated for the newcomers, with bacon cheeseburgers vying with spinach salad and butternut soup. We went inside to claim barstools at a small round table overlooking the street. We asked for the local beer, and laughed when we found out it was called “Resurrection.” A good omen? As we clinked our bottles together, I wanted to think so.

That Sunday, I enlisted a confederate to advance the reconnaissance deep into the heart of Saints and Sinners. Zoe, my colleague and longtime friend, had followed my turn to ministry with bemusement and unflagging support; she eagerly accepted the assignment to check out the Saints that Sunday at worship. She drove up from her home in Washington, D.C., bringing along her winsome three-year-old daughter. True to their promise on the marquee, the Saints gave them a warm welcome. Undoubtedly it helped that Zoe had showed up with Mia as bait; declining congregations universally yearn for more young families. Still, it was reassuring to know they could reach out to strangers. And it seemed like a good mark for the Saints that their musician was African American, in this mostly white congregation and neighborhood.

Our first meeting with the Saints was supposed to be an informal occasion, with Gary and me both invited to meet the committee charged with vetting candidates. Dave, their leader, had made the arrangements in a few phone calls—dinner at a chain restaurant supposedly halfway between Baltimore and Wilmington. In fact, it was fifteen miles from Saints and Sinners and sixty miles from us. For two excruciating hours, Gary and I strained to make conversation. When I asked Dave about the newcomers in the neighborhood, he snorted, “Yuppies.” Chuck, the council president, looked uneasily in my direction and protested, “C’mon, Dave, they’re not all yuppies.” Dave ignored him. Charlene was probably in her forties, with strawberry-blond hair and a shy smile, but she seemed ill at ease and spoke only when we asked a direct question. Jill, a tall, young-looking eighteen-year-old, got through the whole evening without making eye contact. Betty had a kind, grandmotherly face and a warm smile, and she made valiant efforts to talk with us. But she too seemed uncomfortable. Were they just shy, not used to dealing with strangers? It seemed like more than that. They loved the young pastor who had left, and probably they were still feeling sad about his departure. Or maybe they just didn’t like me.

The next week I went to the church for an official interview with the call committee and the council, scheduled for a weeknight when we could meet under cover. I rang at the side door and Dave led me into the parlor, a large, dimly lit room with lamps set around

on little tables. A long couch with a scrolled back stood along one side, with matching chairs set around in a circle; they were all covered with pristine white brocade. The room smelled dusty; it was probably closed up except for special occasions. We got down to it; the Saints and I both had agendas. Mostly they wanted to know how I would bring in more people, especially young families. I wasn't quite sure how we would come up with those, since they admitted that people like that were not only scarce in the congregation but also thin on the ground in the neighborhood. Most residents were older people who had been there a long time, or young single people passing through on internships or grad school or other temporary gigs.

I probed for more information about the two pastors who had left in storms of conflict. I had pictured the first one as a left-leaning community organizer; the profile had indicted him for "community activism." But it turned out that he'd upset the congregation with his campaign to preserve the neighborhood firehouse, hardly (on the face of it) a hot-button issue. But maybe they just felt like he hadn't paid enough attention to the congregation. After him they had called a woman pastor, their first. She had disturbed them by sheltering homeless men in the parlor and then deeming members of the congregation unchristian for objecting. I admired her bold response to Jesus' own mandates, though it seemed as if she had gotten out there on her own without the support of the congregation, with predictable consequences. And then there were the dogs. Apparently, she had taken in large numbers of them, and stashed bags of dog food in the basement, which had soon been overrun with rats. They lamented the extensive property damage in her wake. The dogs had trashed the manse grounds and floors, and they'd had to redo the parlor after its use as impromptu shelter and office space.

I felt a jangle of dissonance. On one hand, they didn't seem unreasonable or bent on stirring up trouble; they were measured in their criticisms of these pastors. If anything, they were probably conflict-averse, even passive to a fault. On the other hand, this congregation had gotten mad enough to boot out two of its last three pastors. And it wasn't as if those were different people—all but one of the members of the call committee had been around for years.

The meeting ended with a quick tour of the church building and manse. Eager to check out the parsonage—my future home?—I barely registered the classrooms and fellowship hall in the basement. We headed down the passage that connected the church to the parsonage. Dave fumbled for light switches, revealing generously proportioned rooms with high ceilings, a brick fireplace, a 1950s kitchen with metal cabinets and newer-looking linoleum. Upstairs were four bedrooms, and another floor above that had three more rooms tucked under the eaves. It felt solid and well built, if a little shabby around the edges, with peeling paint and water-stained ceilings in some rooms. Our footsteps echoed through the empty rooms. I felt stirred by the faded grandeur of the place, redolent of the history of Saints and Sinners and its generations of pastors. But it was daunting too. How would Gary and I even furnish this huge house, let alone make a home for ourselves amid these ghosts?

Then Dave led our group back through the hall into the church. He threw open the oak doors to the sanctuary, with its rows of carved oak pews flanked by stained-glass windows. On one side was a pulpit raised up like a crow's nest on a ship. The altar was a few steps up, against the wall, and over it was a half-sized statue of Jesus extending his arms in welcome. Elaborate carving decorated the pulpit, pews, lectern, and wooden panels behind the altar. The darkened wood and dull red pew cushions gave the space a gloomy air in the dim light, but I could imagine it was lovely in daylight, with the stained-glass windows set aglow.

I drove home feeling puzzled and uneasy. They probably felt the same about me. I wasn't feeling the chemistry that usually signaled a good match, whether in work or love. But should that matter? I did feel oddly drawn to them, touched by their resolve and persistence through years of struggle. We weren't an obvious match, the Saints and I, but maybe that meant we were right for each other. They needed somebody who could help them connect with the strangers moving in around them. Someone like me?

Then our courtship hit a snag. The call committee had come to hear me preach at a congregation some distance from Saints and Sinners. It was the first Sunday of Advent, and this meant that as this Sunday's Gospel reading in the lectionary (a list of Bible

passages for each Sunday of the church year), by custom the basis for the sermon, I'd drawn John the Baptist ranting in the wilderness. I flailed around and finally found inspiration from a sermon by the eighteenth-century Puritan preacher Jonathan Edwards. I explained who he was and laid out his compelling take on the text. As it turned out, the Saints did not find this edifying. (What was I thinking?) In fact they were taking a step back. They were not dumping me outright, but they didn't want to go ahead until they heard me preach again.

I was cut to the heart to learn I'd flunked the sermon test—and furious too. I knew I had a lot to learn about preaching—more than I knew then—but I came to it with skills honed over twenty-five years of teaching and writing. The sermons I had preached elsewhere had been warmly received, even showered with accolades. And in seminary I had gotten an A in homiletics! But none of that mattered. The fact was that my sermon did not connect with them—or worse, actively put them off. I considered walking away. Maybe the Saints and I were just not a match. Or was I letting pride get in my way? I decided to go ahead. This time I'd preach at my home church in Wilmington. We set the date for the second Sunday after Christmas.

I had long deemed December the cruelest month. It always found me working overtime to close out the semester, even as the calendar lurched toward Christmas, with its to-do lists for shopping, baking, office festivities, home decorating. It had gotten even worse these last few years, now that I was both a student and a professor. At seminary I was writing papers and studying for finals. At the university, I got the other side of it: student pleas for clemency; stressed-out colleagues; and looming deadlines for reports, end-of-year budget reconciliation, and more; followed by grading papers and exams, and then calculating final grades. This time around, the usual overload was freighted by my constant awareness that I was doing all these things for the last time.

At the seminary in Philadelphia, I handed in my last paper and then walked around the campus in a ritual of leave-taking. I climbed the wrought-iron stairs to the library mezzanine to sit in my favorite spot in the stacks. Next I went into the chapel and plunged my

hand into the cool water of the deep stone baptismal font. Then I crossed the street to the Wawa, the convenience store that was an unofficial annex to the seminary, to buy a valedictory coffee.

At the university I met my last classes and sent the students off with bittersweet good-byes. I had felt weary of academic life for a while, and so I felt some relief, even a giddy sense of release. Still, I was daunted to come to the end of it, reflecting on all the years I had given to this first calling, and feeling no little unease with the uncertainties of the next one. The last month had been a series of last things: my last seminar, my last undergraduate class, my last faculty committee meeting. I graded final papers and exams and posted grades for the last time.

I cleaned out my office, packing up books and files and setting out bag after bag of paper for recycling. It felt liberating to get rid of it, but sobering too. All those conference papers and proposals, minutes and correspondence, syllabi and lecture notes, class lists and grade sheets — documents of the days and semesters and years of my life here. As I discarded most of it, I felt downhearted. In the end, what did it amount to? I had forgotten most of these students, served on committees whose work came to nothing, thrown myself into heated debates over questions that now seemed trivial. I felt grief and anger at the wrangles and bureaucratic obstacles of academic life, and more than that, dismayed at the evidence of my own misguided priorities and squandered energy. Then again, I had relished the energy of intellectual exchange and had often found satisfaction and joy in teaching. I'd loved much of my academic life, and been well rewarded for it. Someday, I thought, I'd regard it with more equanimity than I felt now, and with gratitude for the rich and meaningful work of this first vocation. But as Zoe helped me pack the last few boxes and waved as I drove away, I felt stunned and apprehensive.



On December 26, 2004, a week before I was scheduled to preach, an obliterating tsunami hit South Asia and Africa. Tens of thousands of people, many of them children, were sucked to the ocean

floor. The news was filled with appalling photographs and stories, as people searched desperately for the missing, and rescue operations tried to reach the millions without shelter, food, or water. The Scripture for January 2: Jeremiah's proclamation of God's promise to turn mourning into joy, and the enigmatic prologue from John: "In the beginning was the Word. . . the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it." It was an apt initiation into the impossibility of preaching. Absolutely nothing I could say would be adequate. But I had to say something. It was my job as preacher to find God even in this devastation, or at least to lead a search party into the darkness, shining a weak flashlight in front of us. With my hands gripping the pulpit to still my trembling, I stood up that Sunday and poured out my heart, all the grief and agonized questions and deep undefeated hope. Then I sat down, wrung out but calm. If I hadn't connected with the Saints this time, we were done—and so be it.

The call committee gave thumbs up, and we headed into the last lap: interview weekend, when candidate and congregation meet face-to-face. On the appointed Saturday night, the Saints assembled to fete us with a potluck in the fellowship hall, with tables covered with casseroles and salads, cakes and pies and cookies. As we ate and talked, I kept trying to imagine myself as their pastor. If this worked out, I would be teaching confirmation to those three eleven-year-olds; visiting Lois, who'd gestured to the scarf around her head as she explained she had cancer; burying John, who held us rapt as he told about landing on the beaches of Normandy on D-Day. I felt warmed by the shy smiles that greeted us around the room—though also out of place and acutely aware that Gary and I would be outsiders among the blue-collar Saints.

I felt relieved to spot one person who seemed more like me and my tribe. Georgia wore a boiled wool blazer with a contemporary design. Her hair was stylishly cut and colored; she looked to be about my age or a few years older. She told me she had grown up in another part of Baltimore, raised her kids in the suburbs, and then exchanged the big house and lawn for a row house right down the block. I sensed she would be an ally and a crucial link to the new neighbors. And it seemed that the Saints had accepted

her; she even moved freely in and out of the kitchen, probably the inner sanctum here, as in other congregations.

Taut with nerves, I didn't sleep well in the hotel that night. My stomach was roiling as the service began on Sunday. When it was time to preach, I climbed up into the pulpit with a sense of doom. Up there the air seemed thinner, though it was only three steep steps from the floor. I took a deep breath and looked over the congregation, then launched into the sermon. Their faces were unreadable, but at least I didn't see anyone scowling or crossing their arms over their chest. One older man was asleep, snoring lightly, but maybe he always dropped off during the sermon. Afterwards, Dave led Gary and me into the parlor to wait out the vote. I eased off my shoes and slouched into one of the brocade chairs. Gary offered me a section of the Sunday paper, but I was too wired to read. Downstairs the congregation was making the decision that would either certify my new vocation or send me on a U-turn back into the call process.

I wasn't sure how long these votes usually took, but just as I was beginning to feel as if this one had gone on for too long, Chuck, the council president, appeared at the door and grinned as he announced, "White smoke." Downstairs in the fellowship hall, the congregation broke into applause. I looked around the room. A couple of people looked away—no votes, probably. The kids looked excited. Georgia wore a triumphant smile; she caught my eye and nodded encouragingly. Around the room, I saw faces lit with smiles and what looked like hope.

Called! After these years of preparation and months of waiting, I was going to be a pastor. *Their* pastor.

Three weeks later, I stood up to make the promises of ordination. I felt exhilarated, thrilled to be at the edge of this new life. Buoyed by all the people who'd come to support me. Filled by the music and language of the ordination service. And oddly braced by the preacher's refrain, as he kept repeating what I deeply knew.

I was not equipped.