April 14, 2018, Feast of the Annunciation (transferred)

The Rev. Sandi J. Albom’s ordination to the priesthood

Grace Church, Manchester, New Hampshire

Isaiah 7:10-14 Hebrews 10:4-10

Canticle 15 Luke 1:26-38

We thank you Jesus for all the ways you Easter within us. Amen

(Thank you’s on behalf of Sandi)- To Bishop Rob Hirschfeld, The Rev. Dr. Marjorie Gerbracht Stagnaro, the staff of diocesan house, the parishioners and priests throughout the diocese, the choirs of Grace Church and All Saints’ and Christ Church, Bob, Janet, Sandi’s friends and family, the recovery community….the early native people in nurturing and mothering this land of Manchester: the Abenaki Nation and the Pennacook Tribe, these our forbearers, we honor).

And for all the invisible hands and hearts that have nurtured you, Sandi, to this point, remembering especially your father and brother who are here with you in spirit.

Such a rich service, this ordination service, with so many wonderful questions. Our prayer book service of consecration is a wonderful mix of our baptismal service and the marriage rite - with the making of promises and the sealing of vows, in all the ways we seek to serve the dignity of Christ in every person and the promise to have and to hold from this day forward, our Beloved.

On the occasion of an ordination, all of us today-priests, deacons, bishops, laity, and our priest-to-be-Sandi, are trusting our lives, yet again, to our Beloved, who will deepen us into our dance of intimacy with our faith, as we live and move and have our being.

One question in the Examination particularly caught my eye: “Will you be diligent in the reading and study of Holy Scriptures, and in seeking the knowledge of such things as may make you ***a*** stronger and more able minister of Christ?”

Seeking the knowledge of such things.

Such things. Things as ***may*** make you ***a*** stronger and more able minister of Christ…..

What are these ***such things***? I love how vague this phrase is, which makes it all the more piercing in its challenge. Will you be open, will you seek, will you listen, will you receive all SUCH THINGS that may make you ***a*** stronger and more able minister of Christ? Lord, it’s a terrifying question….. because we have no control of what these SUCH THINGS will be, yet we are to seek them.

Explore with me as we linger to lift up this phrase: How do we recognize ***such things*** when they descend upon us; how do we have the courage to seek after them? How do we create community within them?

One of our starting points is to remember that God never appears as we imagine. Never. God is always more. The ongoing joke at All Saints’ is that a few years ago, God came to us as a parking lot. Who needs a parking lot to deal with when you are learning how to be Rector? Oh- maybe that’s exactly what you need. God is never without God’s humor.

All through Scripture, God appears ***not*** as we imagine: as a woman, demeaned by her society, sweeping for a lost coin, a coin of insignificance. Or as a shepherd, with a vocation of ill repute, looking for a lost sheep, putting the 99 at risk, because the one lost, left behind, and lame is so precious. Or a widow putting her last two pennies into the offertory plate, supporting a system that is designed to further alienate her from safety and protection, yet she gives, because giving is her nature.

Jesus not only honors and defends these outcasts, those who have been discarded, ignored and abused as not worthy; he is lifting them up ***as*** the ***Image of God***. It’s not just about respect and inclusion- it’s that in their suffering, in their societal irrelevance, in their invisibility, in their woundedness, they are God’s essence of love and power and creation and redemption. Jesus keeps telling us this over and over- how to see ***such things*** as the Image of God. No wonder he was killed!

If we have any doubt about God appearing in the world ***not*** as we imagine, then all we have to do is see this young virgin, unwed, teenager Mary, alone, minding her own business, caught up in her own insignificance, becoming the divine vessel to deliver the **Word** to the **World**. In her Yes, her womb will also become the tomb. A womb, at first empty, ***not yet touched*** by God. And then a tomb, also empty, because ***it has been touched*** by God. God always fills-in our emptiness, sometimes in our wombs, other times in our tombs.

Mary’s womb which becomes a tomb, which will then become our womb.

When I was a young priest, I was working with a couple in my office, doing some marital counseling. The husband had confided in me that he had had a one-day fling of an affair, all in a moment of weakness; his wife had no idea, and he wasn’t going to tell her.

I wasn’t paying much attention as they talked, and I was judging the husband, not liking him, picking sides, feeling a bit self-righteous, when all of a sudden, the husband dropped to his knees, wrapped his arms around his wife’s legs, put his head in his wife’s lap and began to sob, admitting to everything he had done, and how sorry he was.

My reaction was to want to throw myself at their feet, the husband and wife, at their suffering, at their hope, at their sorrow and struggles and to say:

“I’m so sorry, I didn’t know, forgive me, help me.”

Bishop Rob you have preached on this litany of humility many times- it’s a mantra for all of us, to keep us open, forgiving, receiving and Christ-like in order to see the image of God in ***such things***; things we never imagined.

Just as God never appears as we imagine, God also comes to us disguised as our own life. And in that life, Truth resides. We just get distracted and don’t see it. Sandi, one of your greatest gifts is that you are Real. And we need priests to help us be Real.

There’s a classic story about the great Rabbi Zusha, who was found agitated and upset as he lay on his deathbed. His students asked, “Rebbe, why are you so sad? After all the great things you have accomplished, your place in heaven is assured!”

“I’m afraid!” Zusha replied, “Because when I get to heaven, God won’t ask me ‘Why weren’t you more like Moses?’ or ‘Why weren’t you more like King David?’ God will ask ‘Zusha, why weren’t you more like Zusha?’

Sandi, you’re the real deal. You’re comfortable in your own skin. We love your self-deprecating humor, your playfulness, the twinkle in your eye, your incisiveness, your ability to get a job done, your patience, your impatience, and your capacity to sit with those sleeping tigers of fear that reside in the corners of all our hearts, and to not be afraid. You’ll wake them up if need be, knowing that it is prayer that will get us through the darkest night of our souls.

Prayer gives us the power to touch God’s heart-strings, and Sandi you are there, helping us to ground ourselves in God’s love affair with us. It’s God who resides in our heart, and you are there as our guide, helping us to the Truth of who we are in God’s gift of our real Self, our own heart-strings, the knowledge of ***such things***.

I’ve noticed lately as people come to the rail to receive communion, they often take a deep breath, almost a sigh, as they settle in. Sometimes, I wonder if this is the first rest they have taken all week, so crazy busy we all are. It’s an intimate moment of grace, a precious gift of trust to rest in their Lord and to rest in their priest.

In that trust, we are connected, as we all come with empty hands. We are the same, like Jesus, both wounded and resurrected, and we are resting with each other and in the strength of a small piece of bread and little sip of wine. In the open, empty hands. In the giving and in the receiving. In the suffering. In the joys.

**Such things**, like with Mary, overshadow us, reminding us that we are never really ***coming back*** to God each week. Rather we are ***coming into the*** ***deepening of ourselves*** to God, day by day, trusting that our simple lives will show forth the glory of God. God, who often works through what is not said by people who are not named, takes the wombs of our suffering and our joys to create something, to let us come to something, to let us redeem something.

And you Sandi, by the grace of God, you will be part of ***such things*** as Priest in God’s Church. You are so called, and today, on the Feast of the Annunciation, with your Yes, God’s Yes, Our Yes, we lay our hands on you and make you priest. Alleluia! Alleluia!