

“Born to Raise Us from the Earth”

A Sermon Series for Saint Mark's, Evanston by
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Sunday, January 13

“I Met What Came, and
Have Left Behind My Sorrows,
and Am Traveling Still.”

My first day of school in 1963 was more of a shock than it is for most other children. My parents had seen no need for me to attend preschool or kindergarten; they said I already knew how to drink juice and take naps. So I never saw the inside of a classroom until the first day of first grade. A few weeks earlier I had been taken to register at a little storefront office, an outpost of the school district in the same strip mall where the bakery my dad and I visited faithfully for sweet rolls every Saturday morning was located. Even a few months into my sixth year I understood that inside that little office with its fluorescent ceiling lights I was coming up against bureaucracy, and an icy blast from a Siberian gulag blew across my till then endless summer vacation. Later my father and I visited my elementary school where we were given a tour of the brand new facility built to accommodate the burgeoning suburb of Arlington Heights. Both occasions had an air of unreality. “Maybe this won’t happen,” I kept thinking to myself. “Maybe I won’t have to go to school.” I tried to picture what school would be like, but my imagination was constrained by the very full existence I had led up until that moment, which consisted of playing, lunch, playing some more, dinner, TV and bed. The first day of school was only a half-day, but it seemed endless, and the antiseptic smells of new bricks and paint and desks alienated and depressed me. On my second day I happened to be standing next to the slide in the playground at recess when some boys I didn’t know began throwing rocks down its shiny new surface. I was rounded up by an adult monitor with the other boys and reprimanded by a scary teacher who was not my own. The injustice of it all till stings today! By then I had no doubt that life as I’d known it was over, never to return.

The moment of Jesus’ baptism marks a similar transition; what had he been doing up till then? What had his daily life been like? We’ll never know, of course. Various legends place him in locations as disparate as Tibet and Cornwall; it’s unlikely that both could be correct, and it’s more probable that Jesus had never been more than a day’s journey from his birthplace. But what’s beyond dispute is that at his baptism in Jordan he becomes a public figure, and whatever life he’d led up till then is over. How did he feel, moving with the crowds toward the animal-skinned John standing waist-deep in the river? Perhaps it all had an air of unreality. Jesus may have been thinking to himself, “Maybe this won’t happen after all. Maybe I won’t have to do this.” The transition from a private life to a public one is a kind of death, one Jesus endured long before the Cross, one of many along the way to claiming his vocation.

One of the hallmarks of true maturation is realizing that life is episodic and circular, not linear and cumulative. In childhood, in adolescence, in early adulthood, we tend to think in terms of “If only I could...” “If only I could get that toy, or get that girl or boy to notice me, or get into that college, or get that job...” Then we reach that milestone or get that thing we most wanted and it turns out not to be the solution to our lives after all. If we’re paying attention, we eventually shift our thinking at some point away from “If only I could...” to that day-to-day

enjoyment of life we knew as small children, before we went to school, when every day seemed full of possibility and we had no goals on the horizon beyond being allowed to stay up as late as possible. We begin to appreciate the people in our immediate circle, the homes we've created, the blend of experiences and gifts we've accumulated that is ours and no one else's. And in the midst of such awareness sometimes we have a moment like Jesus' baptism, when the heavens open and we understand that we are loved and that we have an identity, and a purpose, and something to do with our lives for however long they last — and we recommit to the journey with the companions God has given us.

Rose Tremain's 1994 novel *Restoration* was made into a movie starring Robert Downey, Jr. and Sam Neill and released in 1996. It tells the story of one Robert Merivel, an apprentice physician who attracts the attention of King Charles II shortly after his restoration to the throne of England following decades of civil war. The king's favor results in wealth and power for Merivel, both of which are lost when the king's opinion changes, and Merivel becomes a wandering healer. After a series of calamities and tragedies climaxing in a renewed outbreak of the plague and the Great Fire of London, Merivel reaches the lowest point of his life. He has lost his career, his home, his wife, and his child. But the story takes a surprising turn when the king learns that Merivel anonymously healed the king's mistress who had been given up for dead, and restores Merivel to his estate and position at court. Merivel's child, rescued from the fire, is also restored to him, so the movie might well have ended on a triumphant note. Yet here are the last lines of the movie, taken directly from the novel, and spoken in voiceover by Merivel: "The fire in its fury has consumed the great plague. Misfortune may leave behind unlooked-for blessings... none dearer than you, my little Margaret. I will return to the city, to my work as a doctor, and the rebuilding of the King's Hospital. The stars that once confused me seem now to light a path that is clear, that I have in truth been traveling for all these days. Where I met what came, and left behind my sorrows. And I am traveling still."¹

It's only when we realize that we aren't heading toward a grand conclusion that we can cherish each of life's transitions, asking ourselves what we have learned, what we want to take with us into the next stage of life, and what we want to leave behind. This community is facing just such a transition, and it would be logical to adopt the thinking of our early life at such a moment: "If only we could call the right rector, then we'll be done." But I hope you'll see the calling of your new rector not as a goal to be achieved but as a resting place in a life of shared travel. I hope that you'll reflect on your journey to date, see if you can interpret the stars, discern the path, and decide what to leave behind and what to take with you into the next chapter of this community's life. Having a vocation is not like having a job or a lovely complex of buildings on Ridge Avenue; a vocation evolves and changes as we ourselves do, as people enter and leave our lives. My prayer for you is that you will have many moments like Jesus' baptism, when the heavens open and you see your path, know that you are loved, and claim your identity, your purpose, and your vocation as a community. May you be able to say: "We met what came, and left behind our sorrows, and we are traveling still."

¹Rose Tremain, *Restoration* (Rupert Walters, screenplay) 1994/1995

