

Beginning the Story

Well, here we are.

Finally!

Our first Sunday together.

I am so happy and grateful to be here.

I wanted to be here with you last week, but I was just too far away. A lot has happened since I was last here. After I graduated, the church brought my family and me to a wonderful little community, called Roblin. Roblin is in Manitoba, about four hours northwest of Winnipeg, right on the Saskatchewan border.

It can get cold in Roblin. When we told people we were from Montreal, they kept laughing, and asking us things like, "Do you have warm coats?" or, "Do you have a block heater on your car?" It wasn't long before I understood why they were laughing. By November it was -30, and dropping. Luckily, the people were as warm as the winter temperatures were cold, and my family and I enjoyed five of the best years of our lives... though we certainly missed home.

Anyway, that is where I was, right up until the end of December, which is why I wasn't able to be here in time for last week's service. But, maybe it was meant to be. When I sat down to write this reflection I realized that today is Baptism of the Lord Sunday. That is significant, because Baptism of the Lord Sunday may be the most perfect Sunday there could be to begin a new ministry. Baptism of the Lord Sunday used to be part of the feast of Epiphany, but the church decided that Christ's baptism was important enough to have its own celebration...and so we now celebrate it a week after Epiphany, on its very own day. And I think that was the right decision, because, to me, the Baptism of Christ is a very different occasion than Epiphany. Epiphany, like Christmas, celebrates events which precede Christ's ministry. Christmas and Epiphany are prophetic, but the Baptism of Christ marks an actual beginning. So how perfect is it that the Baptism of the Lord Sunday falls on this Sunday, when we begin our ministry together?

I have been thinking about this service for a long time. And what I've been thinking is that, since this Sunday is about beginnings, maybe I should start at the beginning, and introduce myself and my family. Some of you may remember me. I had the great privilege of spending some time here about five years ago, in my last year of training. I have so many wonderful memories of that time. Which is one of the reasons I was so excited about the opportunity to return.

I am a local product. I lived almost all of my life in Pointe-Claire. I grew up in Southwest One, and I then bought a home in Valois with my wife, Merrie. We lived there until the church settled us in Manitoba.

Merrie is also a local product. She grew up in Dorval. Merrie is a lifelong member of the United Church, and as soon as we were married she wanted us to join a church together. I have to admit, I wasn't attending church regularly at that time. However, when I was younger I attended St. Mary's Anglican Church, in Kirkland. That means, of course, Merrie and I had a mixed marriage – Anglican and United. Before we were married I was worried about how we were going to bridge the huge ecclesiological chasm between us, but Merrie wasn't. She always said we would find a way to compromise, and we did...I became United.

Merrie and I have four kids: Bethany (20), Emma (18), Joey (12), and Erin (7). If I were to sum up each of our kids with a word or two, I'd say that Beth was the sensitive artist, Emma the argumentative lawyer, Joey is the athlete, and Erin is *the boss* (at least she thinks she is).

Merrie's background is in special education and social counselling. She had the same job for eighteen years before we were settled in Manitoba, and then she had nine jobs in five years. Finding regular employment can sometimes be challenging in small communities. Merrie worked wherever she could, often filling in for people on leave. She taught reading in an adult education centre, she was a substitute elementary school teacher, an educational assistant, an optometric assistant, a waitress in two restaurants, a daycare worker, a receptionist in a car dealership, and, for one day, a book-keeper in a hardware store. She never gave up. I can tell you, I am very lucky to have such a great partner; she is my partner in life, and ministry.

As for me, before I became a minister I had my share of jobs too. I worked in restaurants and hotels, and for a company which rented audio-visual equipment. I was also briefly a part-time professor at Concordia. Some people ask me if ministry is a second career, but it is really my first. Everything else was just leading to this. It took me a long time to find my way to ministry. As I mentioned, I was not exactly a church goer all my life. The truth is, I was always very spiritual, and always read a lot about religion and theology, but for a long time I preferred a solitary, inner journey. I guess I used to think that church was for people who all thought the same way, and I wanted to be free to think whatever I wanted.

It was starting a family that brought me back to church. Merrie and I both wanted our kids to be part of a church. I still felt that church wasn't for me, but I wanted my kids to be able to decide for themselves. I agreed to go for them, and slowly, I began to see that there was a lot more to church than I thought. The experience of being part of a church community gradually helped me understand what had been missing in my spiritual journey. I had always thought of a spiritual journey as something that was very personal and private. What I came to realize was that a spiritual journey really has to be shared. If God is love, then we can only learn about God by experiencing (giving and receiving) love.

I'm not going to tell you the story of the first time I felt loved at church, but I can tell you that on that day God went from being something inside my head, to something alive and active in the world all around me – especially in people. That's when I learned that a church isn't a place where one way of thinking or set of doctrines is exalted or proselytized over all others. A church

is, first and foremost, a community of love and caring. We reveal God to one another by how we treat one another.

I used to think we were saved by what we believed, I now believe we are saved by how we live. Church isn't really about learning the right doctrines, it is about learning how to live with other people. This understanding is key to understanding who I am as a minister. I guess the biggest difference between myself and some ministers is that, for me, the Bible stories and theology we learn in church aren't ends in themselves, they are the means to something else. I don't think they save us by informing our minds, I think they save us by transforming our hearts and relationships. In other words, for me, what is most important isn't what we believe about Jesus, it is how close we get to living like Jesus.

It took me a long time to get here, but I have never looked back. The Church has been so good to me, and all I want to do now is to serve it for the rest of my life.

That is my story, at least an introduction. I am really looking forward to hearing your stories...as we begin our ministry together.

Amen