

# For *THIS*, I was called

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Psalms 139; 1 Samuel 3:1-10; John 1:43-51

Rev Jean Shannon

My sister and I were catching up in a long phone call after New Years. I come from a large, extended, embracing family that encompasses Jews, Catholics, Lutherans, Baptists and agnostics. As a child, the only time you found me in a synagogue was on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. The only time you found me in a church was on Christmas Day and Easter Sunday.

So my sister was telling me about my niece's father-in-law who is very much part of the family. That's the way it goes in our family. If you are related to someone who is related, then you're in...and there is no getting out. Anyway, apparently, he went to church on Christmas Day. And he loved it. He heard a message that really resonated with him, really touched him deeply and the community was so warm and embracing. He left with a feeling that he really wanted more of it. He was telling my sister because he felt a little guilty. You see, he's from the Jewish side of the family and really didn't know what to make of it.

I laughed.

You see, "our readings this week remind us that faith is firstly about the invitation to be in relationship, the call to be known and to know".<sup>1</sup> So I had to laugh, life has a way of illustrating text...and I was already wondering what I would say today. But that's not why I was laughing.

Geoff and I had lunch on Boxing Day with some good friends. I was still a little full of the Christmas adrenalin and continuous mental review wondering if I'd hit the mark. My friend said something like, "that was a good service for people who aren't Christians"<sup>2</sup> and I wasn't sure if it was a compliment or not. In response, I blurted, "To be honest, I wouldn't know how to preach a Christmas service to a room full of Christians. I've never done it!"

The depth of my honesty was a little unintended but it's true. I am a Deacon. My call is to people outside the church. I have been translating Christian stories and values into secular language for non-church-going people for my entire ministry. If one person walked away from our Christmas service with the fire and desire that Aaron,<sup>3</sup> my distant relative, felt – then I've done my job. That is what I was put on this earth to do. That is my call.

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<sup>1</sup> Rev Sue, Companions on the Way, 10 Jan 2024 <https://www.companionsontheway.com/>

<sup>2</sup> Honestly, can't remember the exact words but that was the gist

<sup>3</sup> Not his real name

I would feel totally inadequate to preach to 'the converted' on Christmas Day.

That brings me to the point where I need to thank you. Every year, this congregation turns out in full voice for the Sunday before Christmas – and then I don't see you again until New Years. This is not a bad thing! You are faithful, consistent supporters that make this community viable. You don't need Christmas Day. You actually know what this season is all about and it's important that you have precious time with your families.

In doing so, you make room for the 'others'. This church was full. There were enough volunteers from our congregation to get the lights on and run the engine of a service. That was their Christmas gift to outsiders and I thank you, especially.

Every year at 10 to 10, I look at the 5 or 6 of us standing around awkwardly and wonder...(will it happen?<sup>4</sup>) but by 10:0, the church is full. Whole families, including children, arrive with smiles on their faces. No one feels like an outsider because they were all inside and almost all are strangers. They don't feel like the odd ones out. There was room on the pews for "others" ...it was safe, welcoming and this is where they wanted to be this very precious day. In a way, that was your Christmas gift to 'others'.

I can't explain what it feels like to preach to this room of strangers but oddly, I am filled (or should I say fulfilled), energized with warmth and joy and deep love.

It is only the next day that I doubt and wonder...but that is another day in Ministry.

I am still a chaplain. Some of what I do is invisible to you. A week before Christmas, the hospital rang me and I met with a family over their dying son. This is not the first young adult ravaged by addictions and mental health that I have prayed over, nor will it be the last. The years of terror, violence, dis-association and pain sit in the waiting room of their minds as parents are present, night and day, bedside to grieve over the destroyed body of their beautiful child. These deaths are awful. There is a terrible cocktail of regret, anger, love, sorrow and relief that story is nearly over...followed by guilt that one could even wish for that.

But at every bedside, God awaits. My call is to let that presence be known. At this time, so close to death, love is all that counts, nothing else matters. Regrets are laid to rest, transgressions are forgiven and both parent and child are free to embrace the love they share. Parents of faith (most often, not church-going) are enabled to hand over their child to the loving arms of God. They know in this moment, they are not alone and they know they are safe in letting go.

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<sup>4</sup> Actually in the sermon, I roll my eyes and shrug my shoulders looking around with a worried face

When I walk into a hospital, I never know what I am going to see and yet, I have the confidence of knowing who I am and why I am there. To this, I am called.

Over the four weeks of Advent, whether you noticed it or not, I led you through what was very much a Deacon's Christmas. It was not about you – or even the baby Jesus. It was about who you are in this world and what power is yours to change it. It wasn't about miracles but rather 'achievable' – things within your grasp.

I down-played "happiness" and up-played joy. Quinn Caldwell said, "Happiness is quick, exciting and usually caused by something outside yourself. Joy is deeper, abiding, comes more from within than without. Happiness makes you breathe faster; joy makes you breath slower, and delight in what you smell when you do. Joy exists independently of happiness. You can have sorrowful joy, joy despite, you can have joy without laughter."<sup>5</sup>

Perhaps my secret power as a chaplain is joy. It is more associated with calmness and is more secure than happiness. Maybe that's what God gives me to bring into a room. It's catching.

A colleague at the university once asked me, why are you so happy?<sup>6</sup> It stopped me in my tracks. I didn't know I was and then I thought, gosh, here I am undeservingly allowed to teach in the prestigious university; loved by the most amazing and wonderful man and totally confident of the love of God...what could I say? I shrugged and smiled and brushed it off as why not? I sure missed a teaching moment.

None of us are without power. All of us are called. The power of Christ is working within us – is working within **you**. God is the power source. We can't control the power source but the power of Christ working within is how we respond to what happens around us. We have the power to respond to any situation – even when it means trusting the source we cannot see. <sup>7</sup>

That confidence gives you the power to change the world. You do not have to move mountains – just small acts of kindness – like making room for others.

This is my call. This is why I am here.

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<sup>5</sup> Rev Quinn G, Caldwell, "Parasympathetic", 2023 Advent Devotional *Glow* published by the Still Speaking Writers Group, UCC

<sup>6</sup> This was such a profound moment that I can tell you who said it and where they said it. I'd never thought of myself as 'happy'. Now I know I was joyful...she just didn't know how to describe it.

<sup>7</sup> Lillian Daniel, "Grounded in God, centred in worship" *Tired of apologizing for a church I don't belong to*