
Vocation - A Sermon at the Ordination of John Gedrick

**A sermon by the Very Reverend Sam Candler
At Trinity-Pawling School, New York
The Feast of the Presentation**

Ah! The wise words of old Simeon, waiting in the darkness of the temple:

*"Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace,
For these eyes of mine have seen thy salvation.
A light to enlighten the Gentiles"*

I sure am glad the Episcopal Church changed the name of this feast day! Not that long ago, this day was called something else. It was called the Purification of the Blessed Virgin Mary, which always seemed to have something to do with the cleansing of women. Here at Trinity-Pawling, an all-male prep school, in the year 2005, I am glad times have changed.

Today is the day we present John Gedrick for ordination to the priesthood, and the Day of the Presentation of our Lord in the temple. I am not going to talk about purification and cleansing today.

No, I am going to talk about vocation. I imagine that the reason I am here is that I have had many conversations with John Gedrick about vocation. Some of those conversations, I am sure, have been completely forgotten by him, and deservedly so. They were probably babblings -like those of a forty-day old infant, like some of the lectures you undoubtedly listen to, even at such an illustrious place as this! Like many of the sermons we all have heard.

As most of you know, the word "vocation" means "call." It means "a calling." Back in the South, where I am from, it doesn't matter what sort of character a man has, it doesn't matter how smart or dumb he is, if he has "a calling," then we have to respect him. He has "a calling" from God. He is chosen. He is one of God's chosen.

Of course, down in the South, we also ask each other, "What do you call a dog with no legs?" "It don't matter what you call him. He won't come anyway."

Do any of you remember the last time someone called you?

When we were young, we heard lots of people calling us, didn't we? It seemed that just whenever things were getting interesting, we'd hear that voice, "Yoo hoo!" Tommy, Billy, watch out. Come here. Be careful.

There was always a voice, usually a voice of authority, calling us. Or calling at us. Or calling after us.

I got tired of people calling me: Parents, teachers, Or maybe it was people I just didn't want to be with: my little brother, my sisters, some goofy guy in my class.

I remember when my first girlfriend started calling me on the telephone. We had two telephones in the house in those days. Cindy was her name. I hated her, actually. I really didn't like her at all. But she was my girlfriend. Right? So goes the

logic of relationships.

You know, as we grow older, people stop calling us -and that's too bad. There came a time that I didn't hear people calling me much. I was looking for things. In fact, around that time, I didn't know much what I was doing in life.

And sometimes all of us hear things that are a little inaccurate. We misinterpret some of the calls.

One day, Jesus, Joseph, and Mary are doing chores around their home in Nazareth. Suddenly, Jesus runs outside to Joseph, and asks, "Did you call me?"

"No," said Joseph, "I just hit my thumb with the hammer again."

Sometimes we miss it. But sooner or later, a true call comes to all of us.-just like when we were younger.

If there is anything we need to hear today, it is that God does not call only ministers and priests, or only rabbis or imams. God calls people all the time. God calls every one of us.

Some of us hear it, and some of us don't.

Sometimes the call of God comes exactly at the darkest hour

According to the gospel today, Simeon had been waiting for years, a lifetime really. Simeon is that old man -waiting in silence--lurking lonely inside every house of worship you have ever seen. You didn't trust him when you saw him. Well, he didn't trust you either. He was waiting for something -waiting for the paraklesis!""waiting for the calling -waiting for the light.

When Simeon saw Jesus, though, he released one of the most wonderful lines in all of scripture. "Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace." And Simeon was released at that point. He was set free. That's what the word really means, "Master, now let me go free. Release me."

A true call releases us. A true call of God leads us into a new kind of freedom. For John Gedrick, the call that we recognize today is a call that sets him free to be a priest. He's been lots of things in his past. He's been around. Indiana. New York. Connecticut. Georgia. New York. He has lived with various identities, some claimed and some not so claimed. Like all of us, we all live with various identities.

But the call of God sets us free to be what we are supposed to be.

As everyone knows by now, today, February 2, is a special day for another reason, even in the church. Yes, it's Groundhog's Day. Groundhog's Day is what popular America has called today.

But it's actually been a sacred day for centuries, for the same reason. In America, Groundhog's day is a way of saying, "We are in the middle of winter. How much longer do we have?" So we make up little stories about an overgrown rodent seeing his shadow.

Some religious folks, though, also call it Candlemas. It's forty days after Christmas, give or take a few -and everybody knows that the number "forty" is special to Christians.

It is no accident that the Church observes Candlemas in this same bleak mid-winter, when the gloom and darkness of the season are at their greatest. The birth of Jesus, of course, is set close to the winter solstice, when the season of winter begins (December 21). February 2 is not the beginning of winter; but it is forty days later, in the very middle of winter. In fact, it is also around forty days before the beginning of spring, set around the spring equinox (March 21). Thus, Candlemas is deliberately observed when winter has been around for a while, when we are depressed, when we not know if spring will arrive or not.

Yes, the old rhyme tells this particular story about waiting for the spring. "If Candlemas is bright and clear, there'll be two winters in the year." Does that sound familiar? If Candlemas, February 2, is bright and clear, then one might see his shadow on that day, wouldn't he? If so, the tale went, then there would be more bad weather: "two winters in the year."

Yes, Candlemas almost certainly has something to do with our present, silly notion of Groundhog's Day. On most years, our media attention is drawn on February 2 to watching the antics of groundhogs everywhere. It's usually a slow news day.

But that is exactly why the Christian Church lights candles on this day. We light candles as signs that God reigns even in the midst of the darkest gloom and the deepest despair, in the very heart of winter. In the deepest part of winter, there is yet a symbol of Resurrection and spring, which is the presentation of Jesus Christ our Lord. We see light on this day, just as Simeon saw light on this day. That's what the word "Simoen" means; it means "seeing." It means "hearkening."

(The Chinese astronomers also kept this day. It's one of the great half-way days! May Day is really halfway between the spring equinox and the summer solstice. All Hallows' Eve and All Saints Day are half-way between the fall equinox and the winter solstice. Candlemas, the Feast of the Presentation, is half-way between the winter solstice and the spring equinox.)

What will each of us do in life? What do you see for yourself? What is your vocation? If you don't know it now, maybe John Gedrick will be able to assist.

John has been called to be a light for us. Light and Truth. Lux et Veritas. A priest is supposed to be sign of Resurrection and spring, no matter what it looks like outside. A priest is called to be set free, and to set others free.

But each of us here is supposed to hear a calling like that. The secret of growing up is to be able to hear a call again

Yes, each us here has a calling. Not every one should be a priest, to be sure. But each of us is called to light a candle for someone else. Perhaps we are a poet, Rodolpho! Lighting a candle for poor Mimi.

Each of us is called to set someone free. Perhaps you are the teacher, the leader, drawing our minds to freedom.

Each of us is called to be sign of Resurrection, a sign of New Life, no matter where life has taken us. This Resurrection is what the Gospel is about.

Every call of God is about setting someone free.

*Master, now you are releasing your servant in peace, according to your word.
For my eyes have seen your salvation.
A light to lighten the nations.*

AMEN.

The Very Reverend Sam G. Candler
Dean of the Cathedral of St. Philip