

Take Nothing for the Journey

“Be prepared,” that’s my motto. For General Convention I armed myself with everything that a chaplain to the House of Bishops might need: a prayer book, Bible, and Blue Book. A supply of paper and pens. A stack of “spiritual” books, including one with the reassuring title, Prayers For Every Occasion. And enough clergy shirts to warrant a request for extra hangers.

I should have known better. After two-plus years of serving as a chaplain to the bishops, I’d already learned that this ministry, like many others, demands that you be light on your feet. A chaplain’s role is to listen for the Spirit and respond. And the Spirit is a crafty old bird. You never know what you might be called upon to do. Sometimes you’re needed to preach and other times to stay silent, sometimes to offer prayer or private counsel, and other times simply to wait and bear witness. Heaven help you if you insist on dancing only to a waltz: at any moment the music can change, and suddenly it’s time for a tango or a cowboy two-step.

Nothing prepared me for the afternoon of the last day of General Convention, not even my prayers for every occasion. The bishops had spent the final morning in one of the most embroiled conversations yet, a debate on how to implement the canons mandating an open process in all dioceses for the ordination of women. Would it be “unAnglican” and “counterproductive” to take strong measures regarding the non-compliant dioceses? Or was this a matter of Gospel justice and jubilee? By lunchtime the debate was still unresolved. I was more riled by this debate than by any other. What was God birthing in this turmoil? What words was the Spirit giving me to say? With a churning gut, I walked to the podium to offer noonday prayers. A woman in a clerical collar, a female priest, I prayed fervently.

I skipped lunch. I had just over an hour to write a spiritual reflection for the afternoon session. I found a table in the corner of the cafeteria and got to work, scribbling notes and praying. This would be my swan song, my last offering as a chaplain to the bishops, and I felt passionately about the issue before us. At 2:30 I returned to the bishops’ conference room, notes in hand, poised to offer those words forged in fire. I had done the work I needed to do. I was ready. I was prepared.

And was told that there would be no chaplain’s meditation that day: the bishops needed to finish their business before the computers shut down at 4:00.

I burst out laughing. If God taught me anything during my stint as a chaplain for the bishops, it was this -- be ready to give everything. Give it all. Give your best, holding nothing back. But be ready to let go. Live the paradox of being 100% committed and 100% detached.

Two days later I was back in my home parish, listening with fresh ears to Mark’s Gospel. Jesus sends out the twelve two by two, ordering them “to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money...” I grinned to myself. Be prepared? Sure. But travel light and hold on to nothing.

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