

# **“Ordination Service for Rob Benson” by Marjory Zoet Bankson**

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Washington, DC : Ordination  
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by Marjory Zoet Bankson

## **Ordination Service for Rob Benson**

### ***Scripture***

*Ps 39: 1-14*

*For I am your passing guest, an alien, like all my forebearers.*

*Isa 43: 1-3*

*Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.*

*...when you walk thru fire you shall not be burned, and the*

*flame shall not consume you.*

Rom 8:38-39

*(Nothing) can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

**It's an incredible honor to offer my reflections for Rob's ordination today.**

As Rob is fond of saying, I've known him since before he was born. That is, Peter and I have been friends of the Bensons since we met in Alaska nearly 40 years ago. We watched and waited for Rob's birth with great anticipation and have been privileged to know him over these many years as God's call beckoned him toward this day. We were thrilled to participate in Rob and Christy's wedding here at this church and have shared many of the questions that arose for Rob as he wrestled with his specific call to ordained ministry.

My own experience with CALL is that it usually comes in three stages: Resistance, Revelation and Relationships.

**First, RESISTANCE.**

I'm always suspicious of those who embrace call eagerly and quickly – suspicious that it comes more from ego and than from God. The biblical pattern of call usually begins with hesitation and doubt – not about God but about our human abilities. Moses pleaded that his stuttering would keep him from going to the Pharaoh. Jeremiah claimed that he was too young. Moreover, Isaiah groaned that he was a man of “unclean lips and an unclean heart.” There is a healthy humility in all the stories of call that I know of.

Nevertheless, we live in a society where humility and resistance are often dismissed as character defects. We are caught up in a culture of accomplishment and smart choices, quick answers and a certain kind of entitlement that goes with success. We live with a terrific temptation make our own plans and priorities and career choices rather than believing that we belong to a bigger story– to God’s story. The kind of humility that biblical stories portray comes from the same root as *humus* (*soil or earth*). It speaks of our deep connection with creation along with the joy and limits of our humanity. Humility and resistance walk hand in hand in response to call.

In the Psalm that Rob chose for this service, we hear something of this sensibility:

*For I am your passing guest, an alien, like all my forebearers.... And now, O Lord, what do I wait for? My hope is in you.*

That hope is the heart of Rob’s early RESISTANCE to an easy form of call. It was a way of making space and time in the temporal world to let God’s call develop and deepen.

Early on, I know that Rob frequently felt like an outsider in the company of his high-school classmates. He was short, young for his grade and very bright. By his own admission, he often felt “set apart.” Nevertheless, he found in the church youth group a safe place to explore his gifts, use his intelligence and feel his love for liturgy and service. In his own words, church provided “a place to be myself.” The church community was an alternative reality, a company of those who were drawn to a larger life-view and deeper values than the culture

claims. That's where the seeds of Rob's call were sown.

Rob's resistance to easy answers may also be the "gift" wrapped in difficulty. Perhaps because he was born with eye problems, Rob has learned to see with his heart. He has long been conscious that life is fragile and sometimes brief – that we are indeed sojourners and aliens on the earth and need to be about the work of peacemaking. More than most young people, he is sensitive to those who are particularly vulnerable in our society – the disabled, outcast, aged and dying. Rob's vision of community is clear and inclusive. His resistance has been directed at easy answers more than to the basic question of God's call.

**Along with RESISTANCE, the second dimension of call is REVELATION.**

REVELATION pulls the curtain back on reality and gives us a glimpse of God's realm here and now. It's a *kairos* event, beyond immediate problem solving. We see God face-to-face, if only for a moment – and it is a fearsome thing!

REVELATION defines the specific piece of God's realm that is ours to tend. When that happens, some hide or turn away. Others numb their seeing with drink or drugs. Our culture serves up a plethora of distractions. Rob's choice of the passage from Isaiah tells us something of his own process of trusting God's revelation. Isaiah sings of God's promise:

*I have called you by name, you are mine.*

*When you pass thru the waters, I will be with you;*

*and thru the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you:*

*when you walk thru fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you.*

However, my experience is that we have to pass through a few fires before we are convinced that God is indeed here with us. Our culture would have us avoid those fires at all costs, but our faith says something different. We are right when we suspect that ordination will call us out of the mainstream and into places where we will be tested and tried. Jesus life is as much a warning as a confirmation of Isaiah's promise. Passing thru fire will reveal the star-stuff we are made of.

Unlike many other seminary graduates, Rob didn't move immediately toward ordained ministry. He took his time to explore the unique kind of ministry to which he was called. By his own account, he is impatient with pat answers and routine religion. I think he is also keenly aware that the church needs to change as we move into the next century. He and Christy have both spoken to me about how few in their age group even think of the church as a resource for living in these days.

Rob's preference for independent thinking and community life led him in the direction of teaching and coaching rather than simply looking for a position in a local church. To use an image from a recent lectionary lesson, Rob "stayed awake" while he "watched and waited" for God's call. Then, between two years of teaching at Eaglebrook, he chose a CPE internship at the University of Chicago – and found that chaplaincy quickened his soul. It required both pastoral skills and grace of God's presence in vulnerable situations. It stretched his faith and his understanding of his gifts. The encounters which he had during that summer assignment, and later during his CPE

residency at Georgetown, provided a clear and convincing REVELATION of the call which had been incubating since high school.

In the hospitals, Rob met people at the edge of their self-sufficiency, where old answers wouldn't work and they sometimes had to deal with pain so real that there was no escape from it. When he returned from Chicago, his excitement was palpable. It was a challenge worthy of his largeness! He began to know what he was here for.

At Church of the Saviour, Gordon Cosby often says that CALL is "simple, impossible and persistent." Simple because it is clear in the ministry of Jesus: feed the hungry, clothe the naked, release the prisoner. Call is Impossible because we cannot do it alone or by our own efforts. We will need help, both divine and human. Moreover, Call is persistent because that's the way God is.

REVELATION usually involves seeing the real suffering that the human journey involves. It is a mark of Rob's call to chaplaincy ministry that he does not flinch before human suffering and can, even at this age, find the largeness of soul to stay present with others when he has no easy answers to offer.

**Beyond Resistance and Revelation, call means a lively RELATIONSHIP with others and with God.**

It is not a solo journey. We cannot claim a call by ourselves. It will always require connection with others, both to confirm the call and to carry it out. Our desire for community is a

mark of God's presence with us. Indeed, we are not created to be alone.

A misconception that the disciples held until the very end of Jesus' life was that their ministry depended on him. When Jesus died, they went back to their fishing nets – as though the call to be with him was finished. They did not yet know the power of Christ as Spirit.

One of my favorite stories of call is that of Mary Magdalene at the tomb, weeping with grief and despair. When Jesus came to her as Spirit, as the Risen Christ, she didn't recognize him at all. It wasn't until he called her by name that she recognized him and reached out to touch him. It's an amazing scene at the end of John's Gospel.

Christ gives her two commands: "Don't hold on to me" and "Go and tell the others what you have seen." I believe that these two commands are important parameters of call today.

I hear Jesus saying to all of us, "Don't hold on to the ways you have known me before." We cannot "hold on" to comforting old certainties (even if it's an image of Jesus or the church) when a new kind of relationship is called for. One thing I admire about Rob is his courage to question, to move toward authentic struggle and to move away from people who claim to have all the answers, even if they are cloaked in educated God-language.

Jesus' call to Mary Magdalene is a challenge for us all – to

let our grief bring us close to the place where death is hovering because we dare to hope that God can call forth new life.

Rob, in some ways, ordination brings you closer to an institutional structure that is dying. It's not news that the church is in trouble today. Young people are staying away in droves. It looks like we are one generation away from extinction.

However, there are signs to hope as well. Never has the interest in spirituality been so keen or so public.

Clearly, people are hungry for hope, for meaning and purpose in their lives and work. I have found interest in the question of CALL almost everywhere. The question for us – this company of believers in the organized church – is whether we can reclaim the power of Christ as a spirit moving today as it moved in the First Century Church

If younger people aren't coming to church for their spiritual food, then we will have to go where they are – in their places of work and family and crisis – to schools, hospitals, prisons and even the halls of government. No longer can we keep the sacraments for a special time to be dispensed only by special people in a special place. No longer can we be satisfied to maintain the status quo and keep people happy with “the way things were.” If the church can recognize that CALL comes to all of us, not just those who choose the path to ordination, then church is going to change – and I believe Rob Benson will be part of that movement.



“Don’t hold on to me,” Jesus said, “but go and tell the others what you have seen.” That’s an invitation to relationship, to witness, to be “Good News.” Rob is already in the marketplace—giving people language for their experience— naming the presence of Christ in the world— working part-time as a hospice chaplain and part-time on Capitol Hill. Like Paul, Rob is ready to teach and administer sacraments wherever the Body is gathered, whether it’s by a bedside or in an office or in a worship service like this one.

**As we gather to celebrate Rob’s ordination today,** let us know that we too are midwifing a new church into being – one that is not confined to a certain location or a special group of people. We are affirming Rob’s call to ministry in the marketplace and the halls of government. In some measure, we share his vision for “the Church Scattered” as well as the Church Gathered. Like Paul, we affirm with our prayers and our presence the radical notion that nothing,

*neither death nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor anything else in all creation, can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. (Rom 8:38-39)*

**AMEN.**