

Charge to the Candidate  
Matthew 2.1-12, Isaiah 43.1-7  
Ordination of Stephanie Coyne  
January 10, 2015  
Rev. Elizabeth Mangham Lott  
St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church

Ten days into the new year, Christmas behind us and Mardi Gras before us, we are still very much in the midst of considering what we will bring to 2016. Is it the year of health and wellness? Of decluttering and living with less? Of picking up a new hobby? Writing that novel? Inviting more friends and neighbors for dinner? Volunteering more in the community? Attending worship at St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church regularly? We look at the year before us and wonder what will be. We do this as individuals, and later this month we will do this as a church—looking ahead, setting intentions, offering prayers. Yet at some point, the wondering and planning must cease, and we must begin to take steps toward any of these realities we hope to welcome into our lives.

As we prepare, let's consider the journey of the magi. The Epiphany story is one of openness to fresh expressions of God's presence and activity in this world coupled with a willingness to take the first step toward understanding without promise of what the second and third and fourth steps will be. In the gospel lesson we find wise ones bearing gifts for Jesus. They are mystical, spiritual people, outside of the Jewish tradition, who are open to signs, open to the skies speaking to them, open to unexpected acts from the Universe. They notice a change and understand that a new thing is happening in the birth of a child, but they look for this king child in the expected seat of power and quickly begin to realize they've looked for a new thing in an old place. Following a sign in the sky, they go seeking a child who may transform the world, though they have no idea what that transformation will look like. And surely they do not expect that they themselves will be transformed merely by looking into his face. The star, the child, and then a dream—the wise ones realize they have encountered something altogether different from anything they've seen or known. The time comes for them to return home to their lives, but they do not take the same journey to get there. Everything has changed.

Stephanie Coyne, you are embarking on a similar journey home today. Like each of us in this room, you are looking at the year ahead and wondering what will be. What will February bring? And summer? And the next school year? And can you even imagine Advent and Christmas of 2016? Where will you be and who will you be? The possibilities of what will be are thrilling while the unknowing might be terrifying.

Thankfully, we have dear saints like Thomas Merton who whisper to us at the beginning of new journeys that don't yet make sense. He writes, "You do not need to know precisely what is happening, or exactly where it is all going. What you need is to recognize the possibilities and challenges offered by the present moment, and to embrace them with courage, faith and hope."

Whether you realize it about yourself or not, Stephanie, you do this so well—you look at the situation around you and recognize the possibilities and the challenges. At your best, you embrace them with courage, faith, and hope. And at your most fragile, well, that's what Christian community is all about. At your most fragile, we lend you some of ours. Ann has extra hope, and June has extra faith, and Tim has extra joy, and I have extra courage. And today we offer all these things to you as you say "yes" to the next step of the journey God is laying out before you this year.

Stephanie, you walked into this church when it seemed everything might fall apart. St. Charles was at a crossroads in her story: a pastor left abruptly after only two years, the congregation was divided on a number of issues, the administrative tasks of the church office lacked the structure they needed, and sometimes the building itself literally fell apart and needed care being put back together again. I sense this is when you are at your best in your ministry. When the pieces are scattered, you see the big picture, name what is and what must be, and quickly set to work.

Were you interviewed? Was there a vetting and hiring process? We needn't worry ourselves with these details. A dear one looked at you and looked at the situation and asked, "Can you do bookkeeping and children's ministry and organize the church's communications and take a group of teenagers to camp in North Carolina?" And in your charming, red-headed way, you smiled and said, "Sure."

While church finances are not your training, you saw the story in the numbers and went to work arranging line items and profit/loss sheets like the writer in you arranges sentences and paragraphs until it all made sense. These funds belong over here, and those funds belong over there, and this account is empty, and that account could be managed better, and this account has no documentation at all but seems to have \$37,000 in it. You set to work tidying, arranging, making sense of the chaos not because you love QuickBooks and craved that screen time every day but because you see hope and potential for beauty where others see weeds and hard soil.

This has been most evident when an unexpected guest stops by the church in need of assistance. You embody both a ministry of presence and a ministry of noticing. Now there is a burden in that—noticing the projects no one else is doing, the water in the

corner that needs to be “shop-vac-ed,” the plants that need to be watered and arranged. It is hard to stop noticing and stop being present when sabbath time comes. But at the right moment and at the fullest expression of your giftedness, a man might walk in who has been in prison for 17 years and needs a little grace, a little kindness, a little glimpse that maybe his life is seen by someone else and maybe his life carries promise and hope. Another might walk in with a scrappy stack of papers and a story about the war and the streets and the money “they” owe him, and you don’t laugh, you don’t roll your eyes. You sit him down, you sort through the papers, you find the order and the story in the scraps of chaos. You call a bank, you call a social worker, you put the narrative together. You don’t guarantee outcomes for their lives, but you sit with them for just a little while and bring a calm confidence, a dignity in being seen and heard so completely, and a Divine blessing with a touch or a kiss on the cheek as you send them on their way.

Your time here in this place may appear to us to be the whole of your life, but you leave here each day and return to your other life as wife and mother. Jesse and Stephanie, you began your relationship as friends volunteering together in a soup kitchen. Side-by-side, you understood that your faith must be lived out in daily, active, dynamic and ordinary ways. You discovered a partnership of laughter, debate, mutuality, and ministry. Life is a bit different right now. The past few years have been busy as you have welcomed a daughter, Annie, and then a son, Logan. Jesse, you have studied and written and taught and written and engaged ancient texts and written and completed a doctoral dissertation. Stephanie, you have served this church in expected and unconventional ways while sorting out your call to ordained ministry. You have cobbled together one job of many parts, one life of many elements, and you have chased after beauty even in the smallest corners. Though the two of you have met at home to parent, to break bread, to catch sleep on a good night, your ministries and vocational identities have been apart. And the promise of rest in a deep and full sense has been elusive. I sense the year ahead is your time to regain a shared ministry and shared vision for each of you individually, for your marriage, and for your family of four. God is not calling Stephanie away while the other three follow. God is calling your family to come away to a quiet place and rest for a while.

Today we will bless your family as you, Jesse, Stephanie, Annie, and Logan, prepare to set out on a journey. I believe fully that God is calling you to a place of sabbath and shalom. You are walking together toward a period of true rest that will surprise you with the comprehensive flourishing God dreams for you. When you are uncertain, hold onto the words of the prophet Isaiah:

But now thus says the Lord,

he who created you, O Jesse,  
he who formed you, O Stephanie:  
Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;  
I have called you by name, you are mine.  
When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;  
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;  
when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,  
and the flame shall not consume you.  
For I am the Lord your God,  
the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.

First, we will ordain you, Stephanie, and honor the years of chaplaincy and parish ministry you have already done. We will bring our blessings from the love and affection we have known of you here in this place. We have named your gifts and the goodness you bring to this world. As you have done for so many others, with the blessing of a gentle touch and a kiss on the cheek, we will mark this moment with you as you step into the fullness of your identity as a minister of the gospel while acknowledging that you have no idea, today, what shape and form that will take throughout the year ahead. With courage, faith, joy, and hope, we set you apart as one who will bless, lead, teach, notice, and walk alongside us all. And with abundant prayers and hopeful anticipation, we will watch and delight in seeing where God leads you in the days ahead.

**For Those Who Have Far to Travel<sup>1</sup>**  
**A Blessing for Epiphany**  
**by Jan Richardson**

If you could see  
the journey whole,  
you might never  
undertake it,  
might never dare  
the first step  
that propels you  
from the place  
you have known  
toward the place  
you know not.

Call it  
one of the mercies  
of the road:  
that we see it  
only by stages  
as it opens  
before us,  
as it comes into  
our keeping,  
step by  
single step.

There is nothing  
for it  
but to go,  
and by our going  
take the vows  
the pilgrim takes:  
to be faithful to  
the next step;  
to rely on more

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<sup>1</sup> Jan Richardson, *The Painted Prayerbook*

<http://paintedprayerbook.com/2016/01/02/epiphany-for-those-who-have-far-to-travel/>

than the map;  
to heed the signposts  
of intuition and dream;  
to follow the star  
that only you  
will recognize;

to keep an open eye  
for the wonders that  
attend the path;  
to press on  
beyond distractions,  
beyond fatigue,  
beyond what would  
tempt you  
from the way.

There are vows  
that only you  
will know:  
the secret promises  
for your particular path  
and the new ones  
you will need to make  
when the road  
is revealed  
by turns  
you could not  
have foreseen.

Keep them, break them,  
make them again;  
each promise becomes  
part of the path,  
each choice creates  
the road  
that will take you  
to the place  
where at last  
you will kneel

to offer the gift  
most needed—  
the gift that only you  
can give—  
before turning to go  
home by  
another way.

May the Lord bless you and keep you  
May the Lord's face shine upon you  
May the Lord be gracious unto you  
And give you peace now and forevermore  
Amen.