



Heaven Begins Now

a Serialization of

All The Way To Heaven

by Elizabeth Sherrill

Heaven, now there's a thought. Nothing has ever been able, ultimately, to convince me we live anywhere else. And that heaven, more a verb than a noun, more a condition than a place, is all about leading with the heart in whatever broken or ragged state it's in, stumbling forward in faith until, from time to time, we miraculously find our way

It is laughter, I think, that bubbles up at last and says, "Ho, I think we are there." And that "there" is always here.

Alice Walker

Looking back on that rainy September Sunday today, more than forty years later, I can only think that God in his mercy worked a very small, very personal miracle on behalf of that pair in the last pew. I believe today in that kind of condescension from the God of the universe. And this belief has been formed and nurtured over the years at that same St. Mark's Church.



The Mesh

That we should have gone there that Sunday, of all days. That Marc Hall, who became a lifelong friend, should have made that particular appeal, and that two hundred people should have been deaf to it, as though God had placed his hands over their ears. These things show me his pursuit of each individual person as though only that one mattered.

John and I, fugitives from fellowshiping Christians, running scared of people with designs on our souls, made the acquaintance of this God Sunday after Sunday in that stone-pillared space where God permitted no one to invite us to a church supper, no one to ask me to sew, no one to speak to us at all.

As agreed, we didn't speak about these Sunday mornings to each other either. For me it was a week by week discovery of the mesh between me and a

particular church tradition. From stories I'd worked on, I knew that such meshes existed. The inner-city kid reached by a tough-talking street preacher. The businessman responding to the workplace language of Norman Vincent Peale.

Connecting

But that God should have a way to connect with me too -- that was the wonder of St. Mark's. First of all, there was a book to hold. As I learned to find my way around in the *Book of Common Prayer*, I began to grasp what a treasure chest of many centuries' devotion it is. But it wouldn't have mattered, to start with, what was between its covers. Any book, for me, was security.

And the language of this particular book! Much of the English in that 1928 edition dated back to Shakespeare's day - and I'd been a Shakespeare major.

Though it was a long time before I could kneel without self-consciousness, other acted-out elements of the service spoke to something totally unsuspected in me. The cross carried in procession, the candles, the priestly robes, the genuflecting - the ceremony of it all!

In the lucid and rational services of the Unitarian Church, with their appeal to the best in humankind, something, for me, had been missing. The numinous. The irrational. The acknowledgment of the worst in us. It was as though, within a life centered on the effort to understand, there was another self. Passionate, illogical - the kind of person I thought I didn't like.

The Visitor

I remember an evening service at St. Marks eighteen years after we stepped so tentatively through its doors, when someone put into words what I'd sensed, that first day. I'd been wanting my music-loving friend Sandra Aldrich to hear St. Mark's glorious organ, but her own Baptist church met at the same Sunday morning hour. This unusual evening Eucharist, a memorial service for our late assistant rector, Father Brinckerhoff, was my chance to invite her.

Two minutes into the service I knew it was a mistake. Father Brinckerhoff, it seemed, had been an Anglo-Catholic, perpetually frustrated by St. Mark's low-church style. To honor him that evening, St. Mark's had decided on an unprecedented High-Church mass. There was chanting in Latin, swinging of censers, ringing of bells, sprinkling with holy water.

Through clouds of incense I stole increasingly anxious glances at my Baptist friend, sitting very erect through all the kneeling and bowing. It was unlike any service at St. Mark's before or since, though I doubted I could explain this to Sandra.

"Well," I ventured, when choir and clergy had processed a final time about the church and the acolytes had snuffed out the last candle, "I don't know what all of that said to you."

"What it said?" Sandra echoed. She turned to me eyes bright with tears. "It said, 'the *holiness* of God.'"

Holiness.

That was what I'd felt, that rainy September Sunday in 1959, though I'd lacked the word for it.

Silence

Long before that service for Father Brinckerhoff, John and I had discovered in "unfriendly" St. Marks the loving community that's been our extended family ever since. We'd met there people of every economic level. A few rich - the ones whose cars in the parking lot had caught our eyes. A few poor. Most in between. For us St. Mark's came to be not a church building but a place where the church - the people of God - gathers to worship.

Did St. Mark's change? Or did we? Did God simply shield us, until we were ready for it, from the warmth that was always there?

Whatever the explanation, in 1959 we were not ready. As we adhered to our program of attending the gray stone church till Thanksgiving, we needed to be left alone and we were. For ten weeks, in a small act of God's grace on our behalf, we attended the 11 :00 service each Sunday without anyone approaching us.

We stuck to our own no-talking-about-it rule too. The power of silence, the God-beyond-words I had glimpsed through Reinhold Niebuhr, was doing its mysterious work. Thanksgiving came and went and, still without discussing it, we continued going. We never did have that end-of-experiment talk. We simply found ourselves, Sunday mornings, getting Liz into a dress, the boys into jackets and ties, and heading for St. Mark's.

We were a very long way from personal commitment or an encounter with Christ or any such thing. Those were to come for each of us in different ways. But since that September day in 1959, except when traveling, we have not missed a single Sunday at the stone church beyond the Indian.

©Elizabeth Sherrill 2008