

The 46th Annual Festal Evensong of Saint George

Saint Paul's Cathedral, San Diego

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Scott Richardson +

Amos was nineteen when he left Fieldhouse in Worcestershire, England. The year was 1639. His father, Eleazar, saw to his education at home. He knew how to read, write, and do sums. Unable to afford passage, he came to America in bond. He went to work for John Winthrop, the governor, involving himself in business and legal matters. In time, he had his own business, land, trading vessels. He bought 5000 acres in Connecticut from a tribal chief, wed Mary Smith, and had six children, all of them baptized by John Cotton, the famous preacher.

Mary helped get several churches started. Amos finally, perhaps reluctantly, became a member – by law he had to if he hoped to be a Freeman. In business he was fair but not soft, honest but capable of contention. On occasion he acted as his own attorney – he once sued a shipwright who reneged on a deal and then instructed his son, the constable, to place the man in jail. This son was named Stephen – his fellow villagers thought him to be too high-handed, too haughty, too willful, so they threw him into his own jail for three months. Shortly after his release he shot a French spy, killing him on the spot. Stephen's brother was named John. He graduated from Harvard's first class and became a preacher in Massachusetts – 21 years in Newbury. When he died they said of him, "A resurrection to immortality is here expected." Through these two the line was established.

So who are these people? They are my kin, the first Richardsons in America. They were Englishmen and New Englishmen. I'd like to say that my line traces through John, the benign preacher, but the truth is I come from Stephen, the rough and tumble sheriff. That's kind of like saying you come from Cain, not Abel. But why am I telling you about them? Who cares, really? I tell you about them because they represent something common here this evening. They reflect something most of us share. Most of us are not here because we're English or Irish or Canadian or Bermudan or Bahamian or Scottish or Jamaican or Welsh or Australian or Belizean or New Zealanders – most of us are here tonight because we either came from those places or someone before us did.

We still love those places and we left them behind. We came in search of the new creation. In the same way that Abram, stirred by God's spirit, got up and left, so did we or so did our ancestors. Some may have come here seeking God (getting away from people like me, Anglican clerics) but most came here seeking the good – good land, good people, a good life, good opportunity. That's the universal hope that called my father's family from England in the 1630's, my mother's from Sweden in the 1920's, my wife's from Mexico in the 1950's.

Many people here this evening have heartfelt links to two different parts of the planet – the place where we came from and the place where we live. Both are cherished. Saint Augustine, in his tome entitled The City of God, says that the baptized also straddle two worlds – the City of Man and the City of God. In time, we will leave one for the other; in the meantime, we yearn for Paradise and we engage life, less than perfect, here on earth. We ache for righteousness and we know that we have a ways to go.

Eric Lax, a son of this diocese whose English-born father would have reveled in today's celebration, reflects on Augustine's insight in his new book entitled, Faith, Interrupted: A Spiritual Journey. He writes, "Augustine began writing *The City of God* three years after the fall of Rome in 410 as a rebuttal to the pagan notion that Rome was susceptible to being conquered because, in accepting Christianity as the official religion of the empire, Rome had abandoned the pagan gods who had protected it. (It was a long rebuttal: It took Augustine thirteen years to finish *De Civitate Dei*.) He postulates the perfect city of God and the imperfect city of man, formed by opposite kinds of love: the earthly by the love of self, even to the contempt of God; and the city of God by the love of God, even to the sacrifice of self."

So, like Abram or my ancestor Amos or Augustine himself, we are, each of us, on a journey. That journey take us away from a worldview centered on self and toward a worldview focused on God and neighbor (and a healthy bit of self). That is the spirituality to which our second lesson points. Do you love me? Feed my lambs. A second time: Do you love me? Tend my sheep. And then a third time: Do you love me? Feed my sheep. Peter is grieved when the question is thrice posed but that's the nature of the journey – we don't get it the first time. The journey towards perfect love takes many turns, it requires many iterations. It lasts a lifetime, maybe longer. Maybe that's what eternity is all about. Maybe it takes that long to live into the fullness of love.

The legend of Saint George, despite appearances, traces this journey exactly. A town is menaced by a plague-bearing and venomous dragon. To appease the dragon the villagers feed him a lamb every day. When this strategy fails, they feed it their children, chosen by lottery. One day the lot falls to the princess. The king begs the people to spare her but they refuse. They dress her as a bride and take her to the pond where the dragon lives. Saint George (O happy providence!) rides by, sees the damsel and the dragon, crosses himself, charges, and lances the beast. The body is hauled out of the city on four ox carts; fifteen thousand are baptized that day.

If we treat that story with the respect it deserves, not factually nor historically but mythically, we again see the tracks of the spiritual journey. What is plague-bearing and venomous in life? What is it that threatens first our property and then our children and then that which is most beautiful among us? What is it that must be lanced (or at least tamed) in order that we might live freely? I've already offered my opinion but I'll say it again; our innate inclination towards false self, towards me-first or me-alone or me-above-all-others, is deadly and the journey toward God and neighbor and true self brings life. Feed my sheep, Jesus says, but not to the dragon of ego. Come out of yourself, love one another, and the blessed land will appear on the near horizon and you will be home.

