

How I Got Here

Sardis Baptist Church

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Jeremiah 1:5-7

The Bible is a library of stories. The story of Abraham covers about 13 chapters in Genesis where it segues into the story of Isaac. Tabitha's/Dorcas's story covers 6 or 7 verses in Acts. Of the sixteen prophetic books, all of them begin with God's call to ministry and some of them tell stories of the prophets' lives. All of them have to do with Israel's story and with the story of Jesus and the story of God.

(Read Jeremiah verses) If I may paraphrase that. "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a pastor"... Then I said, "Ah, Lord God! Truly I don't know how I can be a pastor for I am a woman." But the Lord said to me, "Do not say, 'I am a woman': for you shall go to all to whom I send you and you shall be whatever I call you to be."

When I was in Mama's womb, she dedicated me to be a preacher. That particular prayer changed, however. For on that snowy day in March when I was born, I was given the name Estilla Rebecca, not the Joe Thomas Mama was looking for. Named for my grandmothers, not my grandfathers. The summer after I was born, Mama put me down for a nap and went out to pick beans from her garden. When she came back into the house (just in time, I might add), I was not breathing. In a panic, she picked me up, ran out and down the street to a neighbor's house. The fresh air and the jostling revived me. From that trauma, she told me often during my growing up years that God had something special for me to do. I believed her!

Church was always an integral part of my life. Shannon's job required that we move more than once, but we always found our place in a church. At various times, I have held about every position that churches ask people to volunteer for: teaching Sunday school and in missions programs, leading Church Training, being a deacon, a trustee, serving on committees. Leadership at the associational level was part of my experience as well. Every time a missionary came to speak, I sat spellbound, thirsty to hear more. I didn't know any women pastors, but I did know women missionaries. And I had volunteered in the Baptist Mission Center in downtown Cincinnati when we lived there.

When we moved to the Charlotte area, we were church members in York County SC. The Baptist Association there had a program on missional opportunities in multi-family housing. They wanted to look at setting up programs in various multi-family housing areas – apartment buildings, mobile home parks, etc. As the speaker pictured how mission possibilities would look, my throat and mouth became dry with longing to be pastor in one of those settings. I came to believe that this

physical sensation of thirst was God's call for me to become a pastor. Not confident that this particular association would countenance a woman pastor, I signed up to help in any way that was needed. Didn't even get an invitation to do that.

Soon after I heard that Southeastern Seminary was holding satellite classes in Shelby. I applied to and was accepted as a student. Students have to have a recommendation from their church in order to be accepted, and the church I belonged to did make the recommendation. I had lived in Louisville, KY where a Baptist seminary was just across town and in Raleigh where the Baptist seminary was just a few miles north in Wake Forest, NC, but I was giving birth to three boys and rearing them in those years, so the time never seemed right. Now seemed the time for my thirst to be slaked.

I remember so well my feelings of joy and anticipation as I drove home from Southeastern following my graduation. What's next, God? That was on a Saturday afternoon. On Monday morning, I received a phone call from Union County Social Services. The woman informed me that Eric's ex-wife had accused him of sexually abusing their son who was about four years old. Joy and anticipation dive bombed! Time dragged by. After two or three weeks when we hadn't heard from the Charlotte police department, I called them. They set up an appointment for Eric to come in for an interview. That appointment was canceled before it could be carried out and another made. Again there was a cancellation. In the meantime I had an appointment with the social services case worker. I don't remember the exact words she used, but the message I heard was "You are his mother; mothers are never truthful where their children are concerned, so you may as well not try to defend him! We won't believe a word you say." The police never asked Eric to come in, never came out to arrest him. There was not a shred of evidence to back up the claim.

A summer wasted in depression. One day, as summer waned, I was driving back home from visiting my parents. I prayed, "O God, I am so sick of wallowing in self-pity! What do you want me to do?" As I walked into my house, the message light on the phone was flashing. The message went something like this: "This is Gerald Worrell from Pritchard Baptist Church. We are looking for someone to work with us in our missions program. We need a chaplain to work in a couple of mobile home parks. Some six years had passed since my call to service had become so specific; I was now suited to answer the explicit call to multi-family housing ministry. Eventually I became missions minister at Pritchard and oversaw the work at the mobile home parks and at other community residences—nursing homes, residences for those with health problems, and other places housing people who could not live alone.

I learned from friends that Sardis was seeking a part time associate pastor and was encouraged by them to apply for the position. Tim Moore, who was pastor at the time, had asked the church to make his full-time pastoral position into part time and hire another pastor to make two halves a whole. Magay had given birth to triplets, and Tim wanted to be more involved in their upbringing. I put on my "I can do this" face for the interviews. Behold! I was chosen to fill that position. My duties included youth, senior adults, writing for newsletter, and ---whatever else was assigned.

I have been here 24 years now, my job description changing as circumstances changed. So many of my stories are connected to Sardis, connected to each of you. And many of your stories are connected to Sardis. Those interconnected stories draw us closer to each other and closer to God as our stories are also connected to God's story.

In the coming weeks everyone connected to Sardis is invited to a listening session in which the consultant will hear what your joys and concerns are related to this congregation. As he hears the stories you have to tell, he will correlate them, setting the stage for a weekend retreat and providing guidance for the vision that we have for this church which meets at Sardis. They will help us to see where God is working in this community and guide us to the ways in which we can join God in that process.

As Paul wrote to Timothy, I now say to you, "I am grateful to God... when I remember you constantly in my prayers night and day.... I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that lived first in your [ancestors] and now I am sure, lives in you. For this reason I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you; for God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline." (2 Timothy 1:3-7)

May it be so as we go forward together.