



The Rev. Nancy Ross  
Renewal of Ministry with the Welcoming of a New Rector  
February 25, 2026

## I am in Your Presence

*Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-32; Psalm 119:137-144; Romans 16:1-6; Luke 1:39-56*



*Icon of Ark of the Church, courtesy of monasteryicons.com*

[Luke 1:39-56] *In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leapt in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leapt for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.' And Mary said, 'My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour, for he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of*

*their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever.' And Mary remained with her for about three months and then returned to her home.*

On Saturday, I was holding my one-year-old grandson Zachary, drowsy for a nap in my arms in his quiet, sun-shiney room. And when I'm holding his sleepy little self in the rocking chair, I always pray for him, and my prayer is that as he grows, he will recognize God's presence in his life. ...Because that's always my own prayer.

"I am in Your presence" is the centering phrase, the prayer mantra I use to settle myself, and remind myself, that whatever is going on in my scattered, seeking self, Godself, the Holy One Who Loves Us, is always already here. I need to *pray* it, because, though I know this in my head – I believe it in my head – I still have to *work* to open my heart to fully embrace it. "I am in Your presence," is like a plea, even as it names a truth.

Well, always before Zachary goes to sleep, he just stares up at me with his big round eyes, sometimes for a long time, a look that is profoundly peaceful and deep. And it is cliché to say that that sweet face is the face of God. Yes. But this past Saturday, as I looked at him and prayed, "I am in your presence," I suddenly was startled with: THIS is the face of God. Not in the sentimental way we say it about the innocence and beauty of baby's faces. But in a visceral way: For just that moment. it was the very eyes of God looking into mine. It was so.... *personal, penetrating*. So present. I felt this tremendous gratitude wash over me for God's presence physically looking at me through Zachary, and I started to weep.

Because all the time I dearly want the holy to look me in the eye. I yearn to *recognize* the holy looking me in the eye. And then, on Saturday: Wham!

Augustine says our hearts are restless until they rest in thee. You know that restlessness. And maybe you have your story of a Wham of presence, too. Sometimes, the holy just looks into us, zings us, in a way we are bowled over by it in our hungry bones. Holy presence. We can be changed by it. By noticing it.

But it's hard to live in the full recognition of that glory all the time, even with a baby's eyes in the house – because there's also the baby's dirty diaper in the house, right? – whatever your version of the dirt in the diaper may be! Where and how do we hold onto and connect with God's presence?

Well, this day, this occasion, these readings we just heard, are just bursting with presence! All of the women in today's readings connect to the *presence* of the holy. Through each other.

Listen: Lady Wisdom. Phoebe and Prisca and Mary. Mary the mother of Jesus. Elizabeth the mother of John the Baptist. The Feast Day of Emily Malbone Morgan... I know. That's a lot of feminine energy! But it's for *all* of us. How fitting that on the Feast Day of a woman, Emily Malbone Morgan, and on the day of the installation of a woman as permanent rector, we name the presence of the *feminine* in the spirit of the Divine in our midst – and our readings reflect it.

I have always loved Lady Wisdom from Proverbs. In our first reading, she gleefully sings out how, from the beginning, as God created, well, *everything*, she, Lady Wisdom, “was present beside him, like a master worker, was daily his delight, playing before him always, playing in his inhabited world and delighting in the human race.” What a paean to joy and relationship being the essence of the holy!

Playing and delighting. How often do we use those words to describe the holy? Not nearly enough! Lady Wisdom’s call is to *happiness* for those who keep the ways of Wisdom. Fellow followers of Jesus, how we do know this. The sacred presence is not just solemn, it’s delight – in relationship.

And Emily Malbone Morgan, from the turn of the 19th into the 20th century, followed this wisdom, describing her call to help “make tired people rested and happy” ...resting in God’s presence, body and spirit. Her biographer from her own time, who pored through her letters, wrote that Emily “perceived in each man, woman, and child the Christ element.” The presence of Jesus. In each other. That was the foundation of her happiness. And of her ministry.

In his letter to the Romans, Paul commends the women of his time, like the deacon Phoebe – note, a woman with an official leadership role in the first century of Christianity – as well as Prisca (or Priscilla) and Mary – who embraced Christ Jesus, and worked for the message of the Gospel – through relationship. Through providing for the community’s needs, opening their homes to be early churches. Creating space for people to experience the presence of Jesus in community, in each other.

In Luke’s Gospel, Mary and Elizabeth see each other and the baby John leaps for joy in Elizabeth’s womb at the presence of the holy

taking flesh in Mary. God has always been present, but in Mary, the wonder of incarnation, of Jesus coming to us to be present – in relationship with us – in our human flesh, excites leaping for joy! And Mary’s own joy bursts forth in her cry, “My soul magnifies the Lord!” And listen to those words of presence in the familiar to us, but so powerful, *Magnificat* prayer that she calls out: God has looked; God has shown; God has lifted; God has filled; God has COME. All words of presence, of relationship.

That’s what we’re doing here today, and every time we come together. We are celebrating the presence of the holy, in relationship. That’s what parish community is. Not the building, right? The people! We can recognize the presence of God in so many individual ways, but such a powerful one is in relationship with each other, every single one of us a spark of the Divine, like-recognizing-like.

And so Mary speaks for all of us, if we let her and open our souls to “magnify the Lord,” to revel in God’s presence and BE the presence of the Divine for each other. You, as an individual, and you as the community of St. Stephen’s. When the Divine in me recognizes the Divine in you, God’s presence with and in us is so palpable! That is God’s gift!

St. Stephen’s, today you are renewing your ministry – which is relationship – and you are installing your new rector, Rev. Jennifer. She and I are fast friends, and so I am so glad for her – and super glad for you! What a beautiful, mutual, relationship here.

I met Jennifer when I was brand spanking new to Seattle and a brand spanking new priest at my first call, at St. Mark’s Cathedral, and I was seriously nervous, and Jennifer had been at the Cathedral for almost a whole two years, and so was highly experienced. And no question was too stupid for Jen to answer graciously.

And I had a lot of questions. So don't hesitate to go to Rev. Jen with your questions. You already know: she listens.

And then, Jen had worked in New York, where I'm from -- so she had the vibe!! You know... the New York vibe. The vibe that gets it when your humor is sarcastic and laughs and knows you're not being serious. That let's-get-things-done, no-crap, just-do-it way – in a way that is also kind, and crazy smart. So share your big ideas and your powerful energy with Rev. Jen. You already know: she works with you to get things done.

And have fun, even in the hard stuff. It was so much fun to work with Jen. I mean, when you are considering a rector, there are all kinds of qualifications you seek, which, of course, Rev. Jennifer has: the degrees, the smarts, the creativity, the patience, the collaborative nature, the deep seeking spirit, the genuine heart for pastoral care.

But I am going to tell you there are maybe more important qualifications, ones you can't exactly list out: and fun is right up there. Because if it is not fun to be with you, why would we choose each other? And you have indeed, chosen each other. We all spend a lot of time together in a church community. Fun isn't just when work is finished! Have fun in your work with Rev. Jen. You already know: she is a hoot.

We had a snowball fight in our copes (our fancy clergy capes) between services when it snowed on Christmas Eve a few years back. The holy is present in such joy! And I do think, I won that snowball fight, Jen.

Rev. Jennifer shared sacred poetry with me – gave me her extra copy of the inspiring book *Love Poems from God* which is – and I know this is heresy in an Episcopal Church – even better than the Book of Common Prayer. Like this

verse from Thomas Aquinas that speaks to presence: *“The delight a child can know tossing a ball into the air, My Lord confessed He experiences whenever He looks at you. God sees nothing in us that He has not given.”*

Imagine God's delight at the joy and service of this worship community!

This mutual ministry at St. Stephen's is blessed, because blessing happens not in a vacuum, but between people, like-recognizing-like, recognizing the Divine light in each other -- and this is even more important -- responding to the Divine in each other. Jen has talked about this community with great affection and gratitude, with joy at the prospect of what you *are* doing and what you *can* do together as a vibrant community of followers of Jesus. You see the Divine in each other. You share the responsibility of ministry as a community.

Christians, we are to be Jesus in the flesh – in presence – out in the world. You, as an individual, yes. And you, as the community of St. Stephen's, with your amazing new preschool, and your service to neighbors in need, and more. You have Jesus' work to do in the world. It is the work of honoring the dignity of every human being – words we will give voice to again in the Renewal of our Baptism Vows today, a vow more urgent than ever. It is the work of healing divisions. It is the work of getting over ourselves and remembering you not only believe in Jesus, Jesus is in you, and in relationship.

Sometimes – oftentimes – for us humans, noticing the presence of God can feel elusive. *Sometimes* God looks right at us through another person's eyes and startles us. But all the time, God is there in every person we meet. Recognize God looking you right in the eye.

Holy One, we are in your presence! What a joy!



