

## **The Rev. Dr. J. Derek Harbin** **- Biography -**

Jesus became a living presence in my life as a young teen in the Episcopal Church.

The South American Missionary Society was birthed with the support of our parish and their annual classes of missionary trainees used our congregation as their home base. I was surrounded by people who surrendered their homes, plans, and dreams to follow Jesus.

One Sunday during a contentious Annual Parish Meeting in which parishioners were fighting over the budgeted amount for the rector's salary, the Holy Spirit transported me out of the room to a silent place where I heard God clearly say, "Derek, I want you to be a priest." And then I was returned to the verbal battle.

But I had always wanted to be a surgeon. So using my exposure to missionaries, I rationalized that God wanted me to be both a doctor and a priest. How effective I could be in the mission field! So I continued my plans and entered Davidson College as a premed student where I thrived.

But the Holy Spirit always swirls around me at key life moments, asking me if I trust her. I abandoned my plans for Medical School when she spoke through my premed recommendation committee who surprisingly asked why I was not instead considering a call to the ordained ministry. I reluctantly relented to her call to live as a celibate priest, only to be blessed by a beloved wife and children after hearing God say, "I just wanted to know" as the lector shared the story of Abraham being asked to sacrifice Isaac. At her prompting we left the South for the Midwest with my family's firstborn grandchild in our arms; seven years we would return by her invitation as church planters. In a subsequent bi-vocational ministry she offered God's love through a tiny, family-sized congregation, teaching me that Jesus is present even in broken human institutions, and helping me to see God at work in my ministry to them and to my Middle School students.

One night I woke with a start after God spoke to me in a dream: "I send you forth to a new people. Do not be afraid. The path is now open." After writing down these words, nothing happened for months. But one day the Holy Spirit's whirlwind began to swirl once more. A posting on Facebook led us to St. John's Church, Portsmouth. Someone familiar with our church planting work had used our words on St. John's website. And the *pièce de résistance*: the very night I heard that the "path was now open" was my predecessor's last Sunday!

My life is not mine. It belongs to Jesus. Once again I am being asked to step out in faith. A vast host of saints, both past and present, dance across my life and memory. The lives and prayers of these men, women, and children continue to encourage my daily surrender to the whirlwind of the Spirit who makes me whole.