# *St. Thomas's Episcopal Church*
# *August 23, 2026*

## *Readings:*
*https://www.lectionarypage.net/YearA_RCL/Pentecost/APro16_RCL.html*

Over the past couple of weeks, I've been working on writing program notes for an upcoming concert that includes a famous piece I love and that's fascinated me since I first heard it. It's been a treat taking a deep dive into the piece and into the story of the person who wrote it. I imagine we've all heard it, whether in a concert, in a soundtrack, or in times of loss, of personal or even collective mourning. [play a phrase or two] It's known as Barber's *Adagio for Strings* and it was written in 1936 when the composer, Samuel Barber, was in his mid-twenties.

Interestingly, the composer believed that in this music he had expressed, more than anything else, a sense of hope. He was inspired to write it after reading a poem about the unstoppable life force seen in springtime and in ocean waves. And while the Adagio is understandably thought of as sad or elegiac music, maybe it's precisely that additional current of hope, the music's gradual but steady upward climb, that allows it to speak so powerfully in times of devastation and loss.

The story behind the piece is a simple one that's told often: Barber first wrote it for four players as part of a larger work. But he realized the Adagio could work as a standalone and so he wrote a new version for full string orchestra; sent it off to the most famous conductor in the world, who loved it and programmed it instantly; and the rest is history. That's a good and true story. But I think there's another that's more interesting and that tells us more. Somehow this lovely, warm, melodic piece broke through when *nobody* was writing lovely melodic pieces. The other, perhaps more significant story behind this piece is a story of call, of identity, of a person embracing his call and his identity — of someone, in Frederick Beuchner's memorable phrase, whose great joy in some way met the world's great hunger. And interestingly, Barber sensed his call and his great joy very early. Here's a moving and striking note he wrote to his mother when he was 8.

*Dear Mother: I have written this to tell you my worrying secret. Please don't cry when you read it because it is neither yours nor my fault. I'll tell it now without any nonsense. To begin, I wasn't meant to be an athlete. I was meant to be a composer. I'll ask you one more thing. Please don't ask me to try and forget this and go play football. Please. Sometimes I've ben worrying about this so much. Love, Sam Barber*

The story behind the Adagio is a story of a boy, his mother, his aunt and her beautiful singing voice, his uncle and the songs he wrote for her and all of them who essentially said to him, Yes. You were meant to be a composer. Write music. And write *your* music. Not someone else's. Sam became organist of his local church when he was 12. He loved it and only left when the choir director banned him from adding blue notes to the hymns.

Friends, today's gorgeous readings are all about call and all about identity. And here's what's so interesting about them. It's about folks who did good things, even significant things, but not so much by seeking or intending to do great things or even by *finding a passion*. They did it by living

the lives that were in a sense right in front of them. They did it by sensing what gave them joy, what felt natural and authentic, true and right. They sensed their call and identity in their joy and yes, that joy met the world's hunger just as the mystics like to remind us it does and will; that joy, that which delights us most, that which Paul would name as the Spirit blowing through us, all of us, each of us, equipping us each and us all, together, for our own call, our own identity.

And so first this morning: the deeply moving story of the infant Moses and his rescue by, of all people, the Pharaoh's daughter. The Pharaoh, we're reminded, has ordered that every boy born to a Hebrew mother is to be thrown into the river; in other words, killed. That same Pharaoh's daughter takes pity on the infant Moses, rescues him, ensures his care, adopts him, names him and of course in all of this does something of ultimate significance. *But that's not why she does it.* Pharaoh's daughter senses her call. Imagine the letter she might have written to her father. This is a story about identity. She does it because she knows who she is. It's wonderful how the story is steeped in images of the midwives who are her community; their own sense of call and identity; their own utter confidence in living precisely the moment that's set before them. And if you know any midwives, this comes as no surprise. A dear friend of mine is a midwife and I remember her utter calm and confidence as embraced this challenging call that confused many of us at first but never her. When I look back I see now so clearly how her sense of call flowed so naturally from her life, from what brought her delight and joy.

I also remember quite vividly a moment twenty years ago when I was here at St. Thomas's as intern exploring the question of call from all sorts of angles. It was the very first day of school and the dean gathered us all to offer a few words of introduction and welcome. He talked a bit about our chapel services, the degree program and the many opportunities that lay before us. And then to wrap it all up he said, "Some of you are preachers. Some of you have wonderful gifts with people and some will make wonderful leaders but please, for today, just know that it's enough that you find such delight in the church, in the Lord, and that it fills you with such joy. That delight got you here and it's really all you need."

It's joy that got Peter here too. What kind of letter would *Peter* have written home, dropping his fishing nets, leaving behind some measure of security and comfort, walking into uncertainty and danger, for what? Fortunately, we get to hear from Peter himself in a letter he wrote many years after his time spent wandering the Galilean plains with Jesus, and in fact after a number of far greater challenges he faced as, yes, the early church was built on him and others at enormous cost to them all. And here's what he wrote. "No; we no longer see him. But though we don't see him, *we love him*. Even though we don't see him now, we know him and we love him and we are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy." It's that inexpressible, glorious joy that fueled him. It's joy that equipped him for the tough choices he made, that filled him with that same calm sense of identity *she* had — the one who pulled a baby out of the water — the sense of identity *he* had — the one who wrote melodies — the sense of identity that courses, finally, my friends, through us all, fueled and charged by Spirit. It's different for us all, Paul reminds us. Some will teach, some will lead. Some will find joy as givers of limitless generosity, some will find ultimate joy in works of compassion. Through it all, Paul concludes, will run that cheerfulness, that joy, that delight in which the Spirit is most fully and distinctively and vividly and life-givingly and transfiguringly shown, seen, revealed, shared.

And so, friends, where might our delight indeed meet the world's hunger, all of ours, ours as St. Thomas's? And where might those delights that fills us each in such different ways also meet the world's hunger? Is that call, that ultimate, radiant, redemptive fullness of life in the Spirit, even closer and more real and more now than we ever could have imagined?