

A great calling: Gratitude for an amazing vocation

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [April 19, 2005](#) issue

One of my laments over the years has been over the dreadful image of clergy in popular media. With some notable exceptions, ministers are portrayed as inept, shallow, out of touch with the world and basically irrelevant—like Chaplain Mulcahy in the old *M*A*S*H* television series. Clergy occasionally show up in novels, like John Updike's *Month of Sundays*, for instance, but even Updike, who writes about serious theological and moral matters, has laypeople, not clergy, doing the heavy lifting.

So it was a delight to read during Lent three books which feature lively, somewhat eccentric and altogether human clergy: Marilyn Robinson's *Gilead*, Tony Hendra's *Father Joe* and Anne Lamott's *Plan B: Further Thoughts on Faith*.

John Ames, the 76-year-old narrator of the novel *Gilead*, is one of my favorite characters. He is the pastor of a small congregation in Gilead, Iowa. His father and grandfather both served churches before him and are fascinating characters as well. His grandfather was an austere, zealous abolitionist who came to Kansas to participate in the Civil War, "preached men into war" and entered the pulpit in a bloody shirt and with a sidearm at the ready. His son, another John Ames, became a pacifist, partly as a reaction to his father's zeal.

The narrator of *Gilead* is painfully aware of his mortality. His heart is failing, although his emotion and spirit are profoundly alive. Ames is thinking about the day in the not-too-distant future when he will be gone and his congregation will find a new minister and perhaps undo many of the traditions and structures that characterize his ministry. Who among us clergy hasn't thought like that?

I was struck repeatedly with the accuracy of Robinson's description of what it feels like to be a minister. Ames says that writing is like praying, that in interpreting scripture and writing sermons the minister is engaging in an act of personal devotion. Ames speaks movingly about the privilege of baptizing infants, about "that feeling of a baby's brow against the palm of your hand," and about how it is always

a source of truth and wonder to hold the baby and see the expression of affection and deep emotion on the faces of parents.

Ames loves his life and his ministry, and is not particularly happy about giving them up. He knows that “when you do this sort of work, it seems to be Sunday all the time.” He is unhappy about the influence of radio preachers, whose certainty about heaven and hell eliminate the mystery from faith. When he thinks about dying and St. Paul’s promise that “we shall all be changed in the twinkling of an eye,” he thinks it will be like “going for a line drive when you are so young your body almost doesn’t know about effort.” And heaven must be “your child self finding me and jumping into my arms.”

Passages like those—and there are plenty of them— stopped me in my tracks and renewed my gratitude for this amazing vocation.