

“God of the New”

Isaiah 42.8-16

Matthew 14.22-33

Upper New York Annual Conference Session- 2019

Keynote Address

Bishop Mark J. Webb

Life takes many twists and turns. We experience it individually and we experience it corporately. Life changes in dramatic ways – for the good and the bad – moments of joy and moments of deep sorrow. Sometimes we wonder “how did we get here”? Sometimes we ask, “why are we here and for how long must we stay”?

As the United Methodist Church, we find ourselves in a season that is uncertain. A season that is filled with a desire to love, encourage and bless one another, yet a season marked by deep divisions about some important things. We wonder about the future of this Church we all love. We desire a new way.

We need a fresh word! We need to be reminded of who we are and whose we are. We need to be reminded that Jesus is Lord and that God has a plan! We need to be reminded that amid this season God is doing a new thing! The Spirit of God is leading, speaking, moving, and transforming.

Isaiah 42.9-16: “I am the LORD, that is My name; I will not give My glory to another, nor My praise to graven images. “Behold, the former things have come to pass, now I declare new things; before they spring forth I proclaim them to you.” Sing to the LORD a new song, sing God’s praise from the end of the earth! You who go down to the sea, and all that is in it. You islands, and those who dwell on them. Let the wilderness and its cities lift up their voices, the settlements where Kedar inhabits. Let the inhabitants of Sela sing aloud, let them shout for joy from the tops of the mountains. Let them give glory to the LORD and declare God’s praise in the coastlands. The LORD will go forth like a warrior, God will arouse God’s zeal like a person of war. God will utter a shout, yes, God will raise a war cry. God will prevail against God’s enemies.

“I have kept silent for a long time, I have kept still and restrained Myself. Now like a woman in labor I will groan, I will both gasp and pant. “I will lay waste the mountains and hills and wither all their vegetation; I will make the rivers into coastlands and dry up the ponds. “I will lead the blind by a way they do not know, in paths they do not know I will guide them. I will make darkness into light before them and rugged places into plains. These are the things I will do, and I will not leave them undone.”

Amy Oden, visiting professor of St. Paul's School of Theology writes this in her commentary on Isaiah 42:

The Babylonians defeated Israel. They destroyed the temple, plundered Israel's treasure and livelihoods, took them into bondage, and marched them back to the gates of Babylon in chains. The Babylonian victory over Israel was absolute. This was utter, complete devastation of the political, social, economic and religious life God's people had known for centuries.

How could the Mighty Deliverer allow this to happen? Had God abandoned them? Removed from access to the temple and to the land, were they still God's people? Was God still God? In exile they could only conclude that God had withdrawn favor and allowed the Babylonians to punish them for their sins and disobedience.

Into this identity crisis Isaiah speaks a word. The prophet reminds the people who God is and how God works. He draws their attention from this particular, historical moment, to the larger purposes of God. As Isaiah speaks, it's as though we see the camera lens zooming slowly out from a close-up shot to a wide-angle view, a cosmic view. By reminding Israel of who God is, how God works, and what God is doing by sending a servant. Isaiah shifts Israel's gaze from themselves back to the wide casting of God's promise and plan.

The pattern of servanthood continues from Isaiah to Matthew. In Jesus, God again sends a servant who will bring justice, who God "anoints to bring good news to the poor . . . proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and declare the year of the Lord's favor"

Church, this same God is at work in our lives today! This same promise is being offered to us. As individuals, as followers of Jesus Christ, as clergy and laity within The United Methodist Church we need to hear the words of the prophet today:

Isaiah 42.9: "Behold, the former things have come to pass, Now I declare new things; before they spring forth I proclaim them to you."

Isaiah 42.16: "I will lead the blind by a way they do not know, in paths they do not know I will guide them. I will make darkness into light before them and rugged places into plains. These are the things I will do, and I will not leave them undone."

What will be our response? Will we have ears to hear? Will we have minds that are open? Will we have hearts that trust? Will we choose to step out of our comfort zones and into God's promise and future?

The decisions of the special session of The General Conference in St. Louis has placed The United Methodist Church in a place that some would call hopeless, conflicted, divided, broken and desolate. The divide around the definition of marriage and the role of practicing LGBTQIA individuals as clergy in our Church points to even greater divides we have in theological understandings and in our ability to live within the nature and structure of our denomination.

Amid this reality our mission has not changed. Our purpose as the Church of Jesus Christ is to partner with God in the making of disciples of Jesus Christ SO THAT the world might be transformed through the power of God, all for the glory of God. Our task is to offer a hurting, confused and dark world the hope, light and life that comes in Jesus and Jesus alone. General Conference 2019 did not change our mission! General Conference 2019 did not change the nature of God. General Conference 2019 did not change the truth that Jesus is Lord! General Conference 2019 did not change the fact that every person is significantly loved by God. General Conference 2019 did not change the fact that every human is broken and in desperate need of the grace of God - a grace that our God is giving away freely and lavishly.

What General Conference 2019 did reveal is that our form is impacting our function! Our division is impacting our ability to accomplish our task! It seems like we are spending more time arguing with one another, trying to convince one another to change than we are trying to convince the world to see Jesus! Our hearts are increasingly at war at the very moment we need hearts of peace. We need to hear the words of the prophet today:

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Isaiah 42.16: **“I will lead the blind by a way they do not know, in paths they do not know I will guide them. I will make darkness into light before them and rugged places into plains. These are the things I will do, and I will not leave them undone.”**

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While we celebrate the many fruitful and effective ministries in the name of Jesus being lived out among the churches, clergy and laity of The Upper New York Conference, the reality is we are still living way beneath our potential. How do we continue to find the courage and the desire to reach out beyond the walls of our church and meet the world with the good news of Jesus Christ? How do we take seriously that the purpose of the Church does not center on those who are already a part of her, but those who are yet to come?

General Conference 2019 did not change the reality that we have an opportunity to increase the impact of the Gospel, examine the current health of our ministries and step into the new things that God desires to do within us. We need to hear the words of the prophet today:

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The Bible is filled with accounts of people stepping out of their comfort zones and into the promise and future of God. One of my favorites is the account of Peter walking on the water!

Moving Beyond Our Comfort Zone – Stepping Out

Matthew 14.22-33: **²² Immediately He made the disciples get into the boat and go ahead of Him to the other side, while He sent the crowds away. ²³ After He had sent the crowds away, He went up on the mountain by Himself to pray; and when it was evening, He was there alone. ²⁴ But the boat was already a long distance from the land, battered by the waves; for the wind was contrary. ²⁵ And in the fourth watch of the night He came to them, walking on the sea. ²⁶ When the disciples saw Him walking on the sea, they were terrified, and said, “It is a ghost!” And they cried out in fear. ²⁷ But immediately Jesus spoke to them, saying, “Take courage, it is I; do not be afraid.” ²⁸ Peter said to Him, “Lord, if it is You, command me to come to You on the water.” ²⁹ And He said, “Come!” And Peter got out of the boat and walked on the water and came toward Jesus. ³⁰ But seeing the wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, “Lord, save me!”³¹ Immediately Jesus stretched out His hand and took hold of him, and *said to him, “You of little faith, why did you doubt?” ³² When they got into the boat, the wind stopped.³³ And those who were in the boat worshiped Him, saying, “You are certainly God’s Son!”**

I have always loved the account of Peter walking on the water. It’s got a little of everything in it. Drama, Humor, Success, Failure and oh yeah, some TRUTH.

Sometimes when we look at the passage of Peter walking on water, we are so quick to focus on Peter’s negative. The fact that he sunk. I’m not so sure that is the most important lesson for us to learn.

Did Peter fail, kind of – he should have kept his eyes on Jesus. But don’t miss this - Peter wasn’t willing to stay in the boat. Peter took a leap of faith. On that night only one disciple made a choice to step out, to move beyond his comfort zone - 11 others chose to stay in the relative comfort and safety of their boat.

As we - individuals, and members of local churches evaluate how we are pursuing God, running the race of faith and responding to the call to ministry that has been set before us – As The United Methodist Church examines its present reality and discerns what the future holds, perhaps there are some truths for us to grab hold of and live out in this example of Peter moving beyond his comfort zone. Maybe there are some choices for us to make.

We Can Choose to Stay Where We Are!

A few weeks ago, I encountered a scene in the grocery store that some of us may be familiar with and have even lived through. I came around into an aisle and there in the middle of it sat a little girl. Her arms were crossed, and she was facing away from the woman who I assumed was her mother trying desperately to get her to get up and move on. The little girl was having none of it. She made some sighing sounds and then exclaimed – I'm not moving! I'm staying right here. I'm guessing she was attempting to get something she wanted. I prayed for that woman who was doing her best to move the little girl on.

There have been times in my life when God has invited me to move on and I very much imitated that little girl I encountered in the grocery store. I have been in churches who when faced with the possibility of moving into a new opportunity for ministry and mission have imitated that little girl I encountered in the grocery. I'm not moving! I'm staying right here.

Today in the conversations swirling around and within The United Methodist Church I hear and see this posture. I'm not moving! I'm staying right here!

There are so many things in our lives that serve as anchors and barriers, causing us to stay where we are.

-Fear

A few years ago, I was part of a Bible study at a large gathering of United Methodists and the Bible study dealt with two questions: "What is keeping you from making disciples?" and "What is keeping your church from making disciples?" There were a lot of different answers, thoughtful answers and as you looked through those answers and through the words - you know what the number one response was: FEAR!

Friends that's an anchor we must let go of. We must stop saying no to what we know God is calling us to do and to be because we are afraid of what people might think. Laity must stop using pastors as an excuse because we are afraid. Pastors must stop using laypersons as an excuse because we are afraid. We must stop using the community around us, the lack of resources, the inadequacy of our buildings as an excuse because we are afraid.

We must stop holding on for dear life to the past because we are afraid of the future. We must stop being afraid of letting the world around us know that we are passionate, sold out disciples of Jesus Christ who are no longer going to be comfortable with the way things are.

There are other anchors and barriers that are causing us to stay where we are when God is calling us to a new possibility:

- our comfort being more important than the salvation of those around us.
- our needs coming before the needs of the least, last and lost.
- our willingness to deny or explain away the absolute truth of God
- our willingness to quickly proclaim “we’ve never done it that way before”
- our attitude of cynicism toward the world and one another
- our opinions being more valuable than the Word of God
- our plans having priority and being more perfect than the plan of God.
- our inability to fully trust God and love one another
- our willingness to compromise the best that God is calling us to
- our willingness to remain complacent amid a world that urgently needs to know the good news of Jesus Christ.
- our willingness to live “religious lives” instead of spirit filled, spirit fed, spirit led lives”

In my own spiritual journey, in my calling to use the gifts the Holy Spirit has given me for ministry, in my role within the United Methodist Church I’m not willing to stay where I am – I want to move into the new thing God is calling me to – calling us to. I’m not certain what that is, but I want to trust the promise of God, the words of the prophet and be moved!

Our God rarely calls us to sit on the floor and declare I’m not moving. Our God calls us and invites us to rise up and step out – step into the promise.

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Isaiah 42.16: “I will lead the blind by a way they do not know, in paths they do not know I will guide them. I will make darkness into light before them and rugged places into plains. These are the things I will do, and I will not leave them undone.”

We can Choose to Leap Forward

Peter grabbed hold of an important truth that we need to grab hold of. Jesus wasn’t in the boat. He was on the water. Because Peter wanted to be where Jesus was, he stepped out. He leapt forward.

Jesus isn’t waiting for us to take Him to the world around us, He’s waiting for us to catch up with Him. He wants to use us, He’ll work despite us and without us if he has to.

If we want to be where Jesus is, where Jesus is leading us, where Jesus is moving and working, we must step out! We must leap forward.

Will there be times that we sink, absolutely. But I’d rather sink being obedient to God than stay in the boat when Jesus has invited me to come.

This was the way in which John Wesley lived his life – it is a part of our DNA as Wesleyan followers of Jesus. Look at these quotes of Wesley that shout the encouragement to leap forward:

“God grant that I may never live to be useless!” - John Wesley

“I continue to dream and pray about a revival of holiness in our day that moves forth in mission and creates authentic community in which each person can be unleashed through the empowerment of the Spirit to fulfill God's creational intentions.” - John Wesley

“It is no marvel that the devil does not love field preaching! Neither do I; I love a commodious room, a soft cushion, a handsome pulpit. But where is my zeal if I do not trample all these underfoot in order to save one more soul?” – John Wesley

“Catch on fire and others will love to come watch you burn.” - John Wesley

I'm not interested in sitting down in an aisle and shouting I'm staying put – I will not move! I'm interested in stepping into the new thing that God is about to do. I'm interested in going deeper in my own relationship with Jesus. I'm interested in helping clergy and laity go deeper in their capacity to be Christ-following leaders. I'm interested in walking alongside congregations and assisting them to become even more vital, effective and fruitful than they already are. I'm interested in being a part of the conversations that address the reality of the United Methodist Church – a Church I deeply love. A Church we all deeply love!

We must become urgent about the work of helping people find their primary identity as followers of Jesus Christ. We need to stop making excuses for why we can't do the work of evangelism. We need to discover the new ways God is calling us to move from within the walls of our churches into the lives of those within the community we are commanded to serve and take the light of Christ to.

We need to increase the number of new faith communities we are planting. Through new faith communities we have an opportunity to connect people to the Gospel of Jesus Christ in ways that existing congregations simply cannot. Upper New York has led the denomination in new faith community work and we need to continue to provide that leadership. New faith communities are not a threat to existing ones – they strengthen them – they increase the impact of the Body of Christ.

We need to equip new faith communities and increase the vitality of our existing congregations by:

-developing intentional discipleship systems that will allow a person to experience the grace of God through Jesus Christ in their lives and develop into a fully mature, vibrant and transformed Jesus follower.

- we need to offer worship experiences that are relevant, passionate and allow people to connect to the presence of the living God within their lives.
- we need to make a commitment to find ways to reach the children and youth of our communities for Jesus and then equip them to do the same.
- we need to get serious about the acts of justice and mercy we have been gifted and called to perform so that in the name of Jesus Christ, the world will be made different.
- our primary question needs to always be – how we connect with those who are not yet here.

If we believe Jesus is the only hope of the world – the way, the truth and the life – the source of significance, meaning and life for every person ever born, we need to renew ourselves Church so that through us God may revive the world!

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We have an opportunity to be a part of renewing the local church we are a part of and we have the opportunity to renew the Wesleyan movement through The United Methodist Church. I want to share some thoughts I have been pondering, thoughts that are simply my opinion and you may disagree.

For 47 years, we have been debating with one another our understanding of Christian marriage and sexual ethics. We have tried to convince one another of our position. Amid these debates and conversations, we continue to create harm and deeper divisions. Our ability to respect one another and engage in ministry together has been eroded greatly. Our effectiveness in living our mission of “making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world” is at stake.

We cannot continue to have the same conversation in the same way and expect different results. It has become clear that the deep differences within the United Methodist Church concerning matters of human sexuality cannot be resolved through the win-lose legislative process of General Conference or Judicial Council decisions where winners stay, losers leave, and the Church becomes much less vital. God help us if we still pursue that strategy!

I believe God desires to do a new thing within, among and through the people of The United Methodist Church. I am ready to lead proactively in the current chaos, confusion and uncertainty and join in new conversations to explore options that seek a new form of connection and unity that multiplies our Wesleyan DNA and allows individuals to live out their convictions for ministry and mission through two or more new expressions of Methodism with possibilities for some form of connection.

It is time to bless, support and free one another to be the Church we believe God has called us to be. It is time to end the debate, recognize our reality and lean into the new thing God desires to do.

I'm not interested in sitting down in an aisle and shouting I'm staying put – I will not move! I'm interested in stepping into the new thing that God is about to do. I want to leap forward!

Jeremiah 29.11-14: “For I know the plans that I have for you,” declares the LORD, “plans for welfare and not for calamity to give you a future and a hope. Then you will call upon Me and come and pray to Me, and I will listen to you. You will seek Me and find Me when you search for Me with all your heart. I will be found by you,” declares the LORD, “and I will restore your fortunes and will gather you from all the nations and from all the places where I have driven you,” declares the LORD, “and I will bring you back to the place from where I sent you into exile.”

As we choose to leap forward we need to pay attention to Peter's mistake. He took his eyes off Jesus. As we make the decision to step out, we must do so making the decision to look at Jesus and never stop. We will only become the person God desires us to become when each one of us makes our own relationship with Jesus Christ the most important thing. That's the only way you and I will find the courage to step out of our boats. And when we start to sink, Jesus will be there to pull us up, hold us close and continue the journey with us.

Look again at the words of Amy Oden in her commentary on Isaiah 42:

The pattern of servanthood continues from Isaiah to Matthew. In Jesus, God again sends a servant who will bring justice, who God “anoints to bring good news to the poor . . . proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and declare the year of the Lord's favor”

We need to be amazed and transformed by the grace of God through Jesus within our own lives so we can then offer the amazing grace of God to the world!