



THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

Dakotas-Minnesota Area

Resident Bishop
Bruce R. Ough
bishop@dkmnareaumc.org

Administrative Assistant
Sheilah J. Kyburz
sheilah.kyburz@dkmnareaumc.org

October 10, 2020

A Light Rising in the Darkness: 2020 Dakotas Conference Episcopal Address

Isaiah 58:6-10a (NRSV)
Matthew 5:13-16 (CEB)

October 10, 2020
Sioux Falls, SD

INTRODUCTION

Abundant grace and peace to you as we gather for this unusual, but necessary, virtual session of the Dakotas Conference.

Paul's prayer for the Ephesians is my prayer for us this day:

I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of Glory, may give us a spirit of wisdom and revelation as we come to know him, so that, with the eyes of our hearts enlightened, we may know what is the HOPE to which God has called us. (Ephesians 1:17-18)

SING TO THE LORD A NEW SONG

Friends, I don't know about you, but I have about reached my limit of disruption, disappointment, grief and uncertainty. Our lives, our churches, our ministries, our communities, our world have been turned upside down. The dislocation and abrupt, forced adaptation has been overwhelming.

We have been driven to our computer screens, social distancing, on-line worship and mask-wearing by the coronavirus pandemic. We have been driven to our streets and knees in anguish and repentance by the George Floyd killing and the renewed cries to dismantle racism in all our institutions. We have been driven to frustration and renewed disappointment by the lingering uncertainty and unresolved division within our denomination by the postponement of General and Jurisdictional Conferences. We grieve the loss of church as we have known it, even as we struggle to fan the tender embers of a new church yearning to be born. And, our grief is compounded by the death of those struck down by COVID-19. I know we are in a liminal,



Dakotas-Minnesota Area

divergent time, but honestly, I find myself often longing for the familiarity of a more linear, less complex season, if only for a respite.

In the midst of our being overwhelmed by disruption, death, disappointment and despair, God speaks to us through the prophet Isaiah: “Sing to the Lord a new song; sing praise to God from the end of the earth!” (Isaiah 42:10a).

Isaiah knew what he was talking about. He was speaking to his people exiled in Babylon. He was speaking to a refugee people forced into slavery. He was speaking to a people beaten down by the ruthless separation of families, the slaughter of innocent children, the destruction of their culture. He was speaking to a people worn down by despair; a people who had lost hope; a people being bombarded by tragedy and death.

And, Isaiah is speaking to us today. The message is clear: “Sing to the Lord a new song; sing praise to God from the end of the earth.”

We are able to “sing to the Lord a new song” because God is in the business of bringing the captives home. God is in the business of healing the people’s wounds. God is in the business of wiping away the tears of grief. God is in the business of raising the dead. God is in the business of creating something new out of chaos and confusion. The reason for striking up a “new song” in this liminal and divergent season is because God has already promised to deliver us, to never let us go, to hold us in the palm of God’s hand, and to lift us up as on eagle’s wings. The only appropriate response to God’s promise, made fully known to us in Jesus’ resurrection, is to “sing to the Lord a new song.” The new thing God is doing in our lives, in our churches, in our denomination, in our communities demands a new song. A resurrection demands a new voice. The new creation demands we live the hope to which we have been called.

BE THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD

Isaiah reminded his exiled people that the hope to which God had called them—the song they were to sing anew—was that they were to be the light to the world. Isaiah called Israel to let their good works shine and illuminate a dark, chaotic world.

Jesus echoed this same calling for his followers in his Sermon on the Mount. He teaches us that we are to live hope by “letting your light shine before people so they can see the good things you do and praise your Father who is in heaven” (Matthew 5:14). Jesus does another one of those great inversion things. He is the light of the world. But, now he tells his disciples, “You are the light of the world.” Or as Eugene Peterson paraphrases it in *The Message*: “We are here to be light, bringing out the God-colors in this world.”



Dakotas-Minnesota Area

And Jesus meant the entire world. It is no mistake he told his disciples to not hide their light under a basket. It is no mistake Jesus told his disciples to be his witnesses beyond Jerusalem – “in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). From the beginning, Jesus knew we would have a tendency to cling to what we already know, to gravitate toward Jerusalem, to limit our witness to one hour on Sunday morning with people we already know, to become captives to our preferences and to settle for what makes us comfortable.

Let there be no mistake what the scriptural imperatives are for being the light and living hope in the world. Hold on; here is what it looks like for Isaiah. This is going to sound a lot like what you have been saying and hearing on the streets of hundreds of cities around the world since the George Floyd killing. Are you ready?

- Break the chains of injustice.
- Get rid of exploitation in the work place.
- Free the oppressed.
- Cancel debts.
- Share your food with the hungry.
- Invite the homeless poor into your homes.
- Put clothes on the shivering ill-clad.
- Be available to your own families.
- Stand with those who are oppressed.

Seven hundred years later, Jesus rose to preach in his hometown synagogue in Nazareth and echoed this same call to be the light and live hope as he inaugurated his own ministry.

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because the Lord has anointed me.
He has sent me to preach good news to the poor,
to proclaim release to the prisoners
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to liberate the oppressed,
and to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

(Luke 4:18-19)

Isaiah’s prophecy does not end with a laundry list of what it looks like to be the light to the world. It ends with a promise from the Lord. If you do these things, Isaiah says, “then your light shall break forth like dawn ... and your light shall rise in the darkness” (Isaiah 58:8a and 10b). It is a powerful vision, isn’t it?

Nearly every day for eight years, I have prayed that the Holy Spirit would enable this vision to break through in each of our 250 congregations in the Dakotas Conference. Even as Char and I



Dakotas-Minnesota Area

head into retirement, I will continue to pray that every one of our congregations will be a light rising in the darkness of injustice, hopelessness, cynicism, and sin. That every one of our congregations will be a light in the world, reaching new people and bringing them out of darkness into Christ's marvelous, saving light. A light in the world building the capacity of Jesus-followers to love God and love neighbor. A light in the world healing the world's brokenness. A light rising in the darkness.

SO THAT

Our world has changed. And our methods of doing ministry have changed. The church can no longer rely on the traditional, attractional model of ministry. Being a leader in the church today requires a new imagination for what the church looks like and acts like. But what has not changed is our mission of making disciples of Jesus Christ who are equipped and motivated to change the world.

So, I call on Peter's images written to the small, beleaguered churches of Asia Minor to remind you—Dakotas United Methodists—who you are:

"You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood,
a holy nation, God's own people

so that

you may proclaim the mighty acts of him
who called you out of darkness
into his marvelous light." (1 Peter 2:9)

One of the most powerful and compelling phrases in all of scripture is **so that**. The prophets often urged the people to repent or remember **so that**... The gospel writers frequently concluded their reports of Jesus' teachings with the phrase **so that**.

This little phrase, **so that**... is about alignment. We do something **so that** we get the impact or results we seek. We continue something or change something we are doing **so that** we reflect the values we hold. We take certain actions **so that** our mission and vision become our current reality. We plead with God for a clean heart **so that** our spirits are aligned with God's own Spirit. We pray the Lord's Prayer **so that** there will be alignment between the kingdom on earth and the kingdom in heaven:

Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name;
thy kingdom come,
thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

For the past eight years, the Dakotas Conference has been on a shared *Journey Toward Vitality*.



Dakotas-Minnesota Area

- We have re-aligned and focused our resources **so that** every congregation could become a vital expression of the scriptural imperatives to grow in love of God and neighbor, reach new people, and heal a broken world.
- We conducted the Thrive: Strength for Today, Bright Hope for Tomorrow campaign **so that** we could start new congregations, renew existing churches and develop a multiplication culture.
- We developed a robust clergy leadership recruitment and formation strategy, including expanding our Elisha Internship program **so that** we could better support our clergy leaders and call forth and equip the next **generation** of clergy leaders.
- We launched a Breakthrough Prayer Movement **so that** all our renewal efforts would be bathed in prayer and Holy Spirit led.
- We launched generous givers and stewardship workshops and expanded our financial revenue streams **so that** we could call forth God's abundant resources for mission.
- We engaged in ministry with the poor and our conference mission projects, including outreach to the Bakken, **so that** our congregations could transform their communities by welcoming all to the banquet table. In fact, we saw a 7 percent increase in 2019 of the number of persons from our congregations serving in mission and community ministries and a whopping 29 percent increase in 2019 in the number of persons served by our ministries and outreach, justice and mercy.
- We have invested in our camping ministries **so that** more young persons are introduced to Christ's transformative love.
- We are committed to Staying Together and Staying Strong **so that** we can make good decisions from a position of strength for all congregations on the other side of the postponed General Conference. I have a Strategy Team praying and working to imagine our Dakotas Conference future beyond the actions of the 2020 re-scheduled General Conference.
- We are working to leverage technology and develop on-line resources and learning platforms **so that** we can better support congregations and leaders in a new virtual world church.
- We are committed to carrying forward our core values of fidelity to Jesus, passion for Christ's mission and confidence in our connection.

Yes, the world has changed. Ministry has new, profound challenges. But the call to leave Jerusalem and go into the world to make and equip disciples has not changed. So remember who you are:

“You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood,
a holy nation, God's own people
so that
you may proclaim the mighty acts of Jesus,
who called you out of darkness,



Dakotas-Minnesota Area

into his marvelous light.” (1 Peter 2:9)
and calls you even again today to be the light of the world rising in the darkness.

SAY “YES!”

I was very close to my grandmother Ough. When I was in college, I was called to her bedside as she lay dying. At one point during my vigil, she took my hand and said to me, “God has an important thing for you to do. I want you to say yes.” She wasn’t any more specific; only “God has an important thing for you to do. Say yes!” I have been saying yes to God ever since, because I didn’t want to miss that important thing.

My grandmother called me forth and in a very real sense “ordained” me that day. Oh, I had boards of ordained ministry vote to approve me for ordination. I had a bishop lay his hands on my head and set me apart for ordained ministry in the church. I had the church elect and consecrate me as a bishop of the church. But it was my grandmother who placed the mantle of call upon my shoulders by requesting I always say yes!

Isn’t that what baptism is about? Saying yes! Isn’t that what being a disciple is about? Saying yes! Isn’t that what being part of a movement to spread scriptural holiness across the land is about? Saying yes! Isn’t that what ordination and consecration is about? Saying yes! Isn’t that why we have gathered in this virtual conference? To say yes again.

Our online presence today is not about you or about me. It’s about God. It is about saying yes to the Lord of our lives. It is about saying yes to being the light and living hope, even when our first impulse is to say no or not yet.

Kathleen Norris, in her book *Cloister Walk*, got it correct when she wrote: “With God there is always more unfolding; that what we can glimpse of the divine is always exactly enough and never enough.” This unfolding nature of God’s will and mission is why we have the opportunity and the need to say yes every day. So we don’t miss the important thing God, in Christ, is calling us to do. Friends, I believe this is our Methodist movement’s moment in the Dakotas Conference. Let us seize this moment; let us seize the important thing God is doing; let us be the light rising in the darkness.

So I pray: Gracious God, pour out your Holy Spirit on your beloved people of the Minnesota Conference. Constantly bend them to your will and love for mercy, justice, and compassion. Grant them your gifts, courage, and impulse to always say “yes” to being the light to the world, a beacon of hope in the darkness. I pray in the precious name of Jesus.

And, the Church said: **Yes!**