

**49<sup>th</sup> ANNUAL DIOCESAN CONVENTION BISHOP'S ADDRESS**  
**THE EPISCOPAL DIOCESE OF THE CENTRAL GULF COAST**  
**THE RT. REV. J. RUSSELL KENDRICK**  
**7 February 2020**

Earlier this Fall I was trained to be a Peer Coach. Having a coach is one facet of the three-year formation program that all new Episcopal Bishops must complete. Each newly ordained Bishop is paired up with an experienced Bishop.

So, by being a coach, I am now somehow considered to be an experienced Bishop. I'm glad your laughing and smiling because I am too. I am clear that being experienced does not mean I am necessarily more eloquent, magically more astute, or suddenly more clever. Being experienced does mean I know my way around the diocese, and just because a lot of people ask, I am at 147,000 miles on my car. I have learned some things that I hope will be fruitful in our life together during the next several years. I am in my 5<sup>th</sup> year of the episcopacy. That fact is astounding. I'm still having fun more days than I'm not. I have the holy privilege of standing with someone and looking in their eyes as they claim Jesus as their Lord. I wish each of you could witness what I witness when that happens. Some people shine. Amidst it all, I can tell you that I am deeply grateful and greatly humbled to serve with you as your Bishop at this particular time and in this beautiful place we call the Central Gulf Coast.

I suspect most preachers in the room have already noticed that today's readings are those appointed for this coming Sunday. I am trying this out. You see, I can still recall my days as a parish priest sitting at convention realizing I had not yet written a sermon for the following Sunday. So if I can help out a fellow preacher, that's a good thing. Even more, these selections may give you a way to connect our work here with your congregations, and that is important. Please take the time and make the space to share with your people what you experience and learn during our time together in this abbreviated convention. Most of all, these readings are relevant to what I want to say to you in this address.

There are a lot of different ways we could go in just the Gospel alone. It is like a string of one liners; each could be an entire sermon in itself. So out of curiosity I did what a lot of clergy do these days, I surfed the internet. I was amazed at all the images and ideas that people have preached on, and some that shouldn't be preached.

Taking my cue from some of the ideas, I found I could preach about the many different types of light and then ask what kind of light you are. Then again, I could preach about how fulfilling the law is not the same as keeping it. I could preach about salt and how we are supposed to preserve and enhance life. I even read an article describing how in Jesus' time salt was mixed w/ cow manure to make a kind of homegrown fuel. Like I said, some ideas are better left not preached.

There are many ways we might go. It's about light and salt and righteousness and cities on a hill, but none of those precious nuggets are what is the most important and most radical idea of all. The most important word in this Gospel, and the one I wish to speak to....is YOU.

Remember where we are. We are sitting on a hillside in Galilee, in the middle of a crowd, listening to this Rabi named Jesus preach a sermon---a sermon that began like this: Blessed are the poor in spirit. Blessed are those who mourn. Blessed are those who are persecuted.

Jesus is telling people they are blessed; people struggling to make ends meet; people powerless to those who lorded over them; people beat down, torn up and worn out; people with no authority or credentials to speak for God; people who may have even been told that they were cursed. Do you see where this is going? Jesus lifts them up and blesses them. And then he looks at this rag tag bunch of misfits and outcasts and says YOU ARE THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD.

I know it is not recorded in the Gospel, but I have to believe that there was some looking around – who's he talking too? Maybe a few whispers of 'who's he talking to.' And I'd bet there were at least one or two cynics who snickered under their breath, 'yeh right.'

YOU ARE THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD. Bible scholars have pointed out that Jesus does not leave much room for questions or comment. He does not say--you ought to be---try to be---or this is a great idea....Jesus declares it. He says....YOU ARE!

It is as if Jesus sees something in them that they aren't able to see, and what Jesus sees, he names. But what in the world is it that Jesus sees in them? I'll tell you what Jesus sees. Jesus saw the very same thing I see right now. So let me give it a try. YOU ARE THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD.....YOU, ARE THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD!

You see this is the really cool part about being a Bishop. I sit in the balcony of the church and you can see a whole lot from the balcony. In the balcony one is able to see farther than you can when you are busy on the dance floor. And friends and neighbors, from up in the balcony there is a whole lot of light to see.

For example, there are our musicians who lift us to heaven with the sounds that shine forth in their gifts. I wish you could see this one choir director I know. When he directs his children's choir, no one but the choir can see his face. He makes the funniest faces, and smiles from ear to ear. He shines.

I am thinking of folks I know like Wayne, Geary, Clelia, Leila, Salem, Hayden, Katie, Ed, Bob. When they talk about prisoners, or refugees, or climate change, or the poor, I am convinced I am staring into the fiery eyes of Jesus on the day he turned over the temple.

Then too there are the angels unaware in our midst. You know them. They often work in the shadows with names like Elaine, Joan, Judy, Kelvin, and Bobby. Our churches are so much brighter because of their joy and kindness that just kind of radiates from them.

And how about those who teach us. They sit on the floor with snotty children in their laps, or sit beside a teenager as their world crumbles. They teach and counsel and listen. They let us ask questions. They even show us how to play in a Godly way. And when they do, they give us God. Just last week, up in Eufaula, this guy I know, he started to simply tell me what he was going to teach on that day. And he came alive.

Then there is this woman I see just about everywhere I go. I suspect she attends more diocesan events than I do. She has this habit of writing notes and cards to people and remembering their anniversaries and birthdays. Each one burns with the gift of compassion and selfless love.

I don't get to hear too many sermons. But when I do, I am humbled. There are preachers right over there in this room who seem so meek and mild, but then they set foot in a pulpit it is like there is a flame dancing from the top of their heads. And then there are the children who say Amen in the wrong place and everybody comes alive.

I could go on, but you get the point. And even more, I hope you will get the hang of it too. People shine. And we need to let them know that they do.

I know the risk I am taking, because for each person I name I leave out so many more. However, I am convinced that a lot of us do not fully realize the potential that our lives hold. "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness will not overcome it." Yet too often we don't point enough to the light. We focus on what is going wrong, or how the church is failing. We get so consumed by the darkness of what's not happening, that we miss out on the light that is shining. The grass withers, the flower fades, but the Word of God endures forever, and the light of that Word shines in the darkness; things are being raised up, things are being made new. I am a witness of these things - in and through you.

Now let's go a bit further. After all, Bible students in the room know that when Jesus said the word "you", most of the time we should read it as "Y'all." No Jesus was not from the south, although we'd like to say that he was. But the point is important. The light of Christ shines when y'all get together.

Last Saturday some 30 people, young and not so young traveled from Santa Rosa Beach to Marianna to work in the graveyard at St. Luke's. In fact, it made the Episcopal News this morning. This graveyard is historic and significant to the people of St. Luke's. People in that church are still waiting to return to their church after Hurricane Michael did quite a number on their building. When I was there last Fall this sweet older lady, who is the keeper of all knowledge in Marianna, lamented the state of the yard. I

felt so helpless. Not a month later I got a call from a guy, who said: “our men’s group raised a little money, we want to do something with the money we’ve raised. Do you have any ideas?” From that spark, a fire was lit. From it emerged a gift that I am certain was far greater than the people of St. Luke’s would have imagined.

I see the light of Christ burning in pilgrimages to Montgomery, Hayneville, and Birmingham and the beloved community that such events foster.

I see it in the people from our area who traveled to the southern border to learn and to witness the realities of what’s going on and to serve the refugees and to serve the officers. This ministry at the border and a larger effort for Global refugees, began from a spark of one conversation.

I saw the light of Christ in the faces of college students who I met last week at Troy University. They were the only church in town to participate in the local PRIDE celebration and parade. For their witness, these young people now know what persecution feels like.

Epiphany Crestview, they lit a fire when they decided last year to let the community know that when they say ‘all are welcome’ they mean it. They’ve learned what Jesus meant when he said you will be hated for my name’s sake.

Way up in Greenville, the folks at St. Thomas sponsored a float in the Christmas Parade. They won first prize. Do you know why? Because the judge said “it was the only float that acknowledged Jesus!” How about that for Episcopalians!

You see, once you get the hang of it you begin to see light in a lot of ways and places and people. People are bearing forth the light of Christ in the world. As Eugene Peterson said it, “Each person is given something to do that shows who God is: everyone gets in on it, everyone benefits.”

In other words, it is not just reserved for those with funny hats, fancy robes, or those in the pulpit. It is for each and every one of you; the light that was bestowed on us in our baptism when the light of Christ was lit for us, and it is meant to burn through us into this world.

And I know some of ya’ll are not convinced. You have an idea of what faith looks like, and you are convinced that you don’t somehow measure up. It is a terrible thing we do to ourselves, and these presumptions are one way we put a bushel basket over our light.

So I am going to ask you to shine a little bit in this convention. Rather than having preachers preach during our devotions, (except this one) we will take some time to have some brief conversations. I want you to shine. So let's give it a try [1 minute each----2 min each]

1. Turn to the person next to you and name one person you know who isn't part of a faith community, but you would say she/he has a meaningful life. Someone that is living meaningfully but they don't belong to a faith community.

2. What's one thing you've experienced in your Christian faith that you would want to share with that person?

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2 minutes each; those of you who like to talk a lot, talk a little; those of you who like to talk a little, talk more.

Thank you. What would happen if you tried to do that in a sermon.

Now you know every sermon needs to have a challenge. So it's about time for a few.

I mentioned the college ministry at St. Marks, Troy. I spent an evening with them and they asked me some very provocative questions. After they had their turn, I asked them a question of my own. I told them about this convention and I asked them to tell me what they would want you to know. They said things like the importance of how much they loved our tradition, and they don't want to lose it, and quit worrying about being cool. The one answer I want to spend a bit of time with, was the young woman who leaned in and said: "tell them to stop worrying about things that don't matter and show us that you know what really does matter." So I asked them: "What matters?" I am not going to tell you what they said. Go ask a young person yourself, but I will point us again to the first reading as a possible hint to what they told me.

According to Walter Brueggemann, the folks that the prophet Isaiah addresses are having what he refers to as a "worship war." They are fussing about fasting. There are traditionalists and progressives. They are arguing about what is proper, and what is right. They are fighting over what happens inside the bushel basket. Sound familiar? As it turns out, neither side wins the day.

The prophet answers: "Let me tell you what right really looks like and what really matters." To lose the bonds of injustice; to let the oppressed go free; to share your food with the hungry; to bring the homeless, poor into your house. What matters is food, clothing, housing. What matters is those who are not inside the bushel basket. This is what matters to God. And as God's people, it matters to us.

Because of that, I am grateful for the work of our commissions that focus on what matters: prisoners, aging, injustice, global mission, and racial reconciliation. Their work occasionally makes me uncomfortable, and for that, I am grateful. I hope you will allow them to make you uncomfortable too. And I am grateful to be uncomfortable. I hope you will welcome their efforts to help you tend to the fire of solidarity, advocacy, and action in your congregations. I am glad we are able to increase their budgets this year. Please pay attention to their work and the resources they offer.

There is something else that matters. When I was ordained I said that I hoped for an initiative that would unite our churches in some type of mission that matters and unites us. I suggested I was particularly drawn to the Biblical imperative to care for children. Next summer we will sponsor a six-week summer reading program through the Children's Defense Fund called The Central Gulf Coast Freedom School. While it will begin here in Pensacola, it is a mission not limited to one town or a few churches. It is ecumenical; it is evangelistic in the best use of the word. It is a light that can shine forth in other cities in our region, and it is an initiative you will hear more about tomorrow morning. I believe in this work so much that I am asking that today's offering be directed to that Freedom School.

Another thing that matters is worship - real worship. At The General Convention in 2015, there was a resolution that passed without much notice or fanfare. *Resolved, That the 78th General Convention directs the Bishop exercising ecclesiastical authority in each Diocese (that's me) to discern and implement ways in which small congregations within their Diocese who are without benefit of clergy may receive Communion on a regular basis.*

The challenge is that some 2/3 of the churches in the Episcopal Church can no longer afford a full-time priest, and in our diocese it's 50 percent. Those who can afford a priest, are having an increasingly difficult time trying to find one.

I don't yet know the answer to this resolution, but I know where to start - with you. There are 18,000 ministers in this diocese, and some 400 in this very room. The answer lies with you and your baptismal identity, and empowering you to claim that identity. It involves developing and discipling leaders, especially in our smaller churches. It is the creative work of building up leaders who are bi-vocational, non-stipendiary, and not necessarily ordained. It includes forming pastoral care leaders, preachers, and worship leaders. To this end, later today you will hear about our hope and vision for an extended purpose for our School for Ministry. I suspect this kind of talk makes us nervous because I am messing with the bushel basket.

What if we were free from all our assumptions and preconceptions about the right worship that seem to have been consuming the people in Isaiah's time? How do we honor our tradition, while also

loosening up our hold on our systems and structures, in order to respond creatively and courageously to this resolution? What if we did not have to worry at all about a bushel basket?

This kind of ministry and mission requires a foundation of resources, including money. I am grateful that every year I have stood before you, I have been able to report an increase in giving from you to the diocese.

Thank you!

However, a foundation is needed that is firmer than an annual plea and fluctuating budgets. Consequently, we are moving forward on a diocesan capital campaign, our first in some 25 years. The theme is “Go Forward”, which was the title of Bishop West’s sermon at the primary convention of our diocese 50 years ago.

The focus of this campaign is to build the foundation on which the Episcopal Church in the Central Gulf Coast can be sustainable and viable for another 50 years. Goals include paying down debt, a good jubilee goal in order to free up money for ministry. We want to build facilities at Beckwith that are a necessity right now. Finally, we hope to rebuild the endowment of our diocese that was greatly exhausted during some stormy years of our life together. In other words, this campaign is not in order to build a more beautiful bushel basket, but to provide a foundation for the folks who will sit in this room after us, and to help ensure the mission and ministry that matters will go on in a way that is sustainable for another 50 years.

When I was driving home from Troy last week, I realized something that I’m still pondering. What I realized is what those young people were telling me - they’re paying attention. They want to see the light. They want to know God’s presence and power and they are looking to us to see it.

That inspires me. And the implication of their attention challenges me. Listen to how missiologist Leslie Newbigin puts it: “to go into every sector of public life to claim it for Christ, to unmask the illusions which have remained hidden and to expose all areas of public life to the illumination of the gospel. But that will only happen as and when local congregations renounce their introverted concern for their own life, and recognize they exist for the sake of those who are not members, as signs, instrument, and foretaste of God’s redeeming grace for the whole life of society.”

Ya’ll, that’s what I want to be. That is who the world needs us to be. That is who God calls us to be. A sign, instrument, and foretaste of God’s redeeming grace. To shine. To shine with the brightness of abundant life, given to us in the way and truth and life of Christ Jesus.