



## Opening Worship: Presiding Bishop's Sermon

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Evangelical Lutheran Church in America  
Eleventh Annual Churchwide Assembly  
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*Sermon Texts:* Joel 2:28–32 + Romans 8:18–27  
+ John 20:19–23

*Grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus. Amen.*

What shall be our witness this week? This is not an insignificant question.

In more than one media interview prior to the assembly, the reporter's questions made it seem that the story of this assembly had already been written. The story is one of anxiety and dissension leading to division. But the story of this assembly has not been written. You will be one of the many witnesses who tell the story. Your witness—the story you tell—will contribute to the shaping of what others hear and believe about our life together this week.

So, then, what shall be your witness?

Will you tell how we gathered in fear behind the closed doors of the Minneapolis Convention Center, just as Jesus' disciples gathered that first Easter evening?

Almost matter-of-factly, John describes the doors being locked "for fear of the Jews." But wait a minute. The disciples, like Jesus, were Jews. Had it come to this for the disciples? Could it be that they were literally scared of themselves—that they feared their own shadows, the shame of their own identity, their own failure to follow Jesus to the end?

I am convinced that, as we begin this week, it is important to recognize our fears and acknowledge them honestly.

When I do not name the fears I hold—be it the anxiety that somehow it's my sole responsibility to hold the ELCA together or that I will not give you evidence that I've been faithful in memorizing all 704 pages of *Robert's Rules of Order*—when you and I do not name the fears we hold, then too often our fears end up holding us captive. We then become our fears, and fear—not faith—becomes our witness.

So, it is important to recognize what fear and anxiety can do to us. Fear can make us turned inward, immobilized, withdrawn from engagement in God's mission—mere shadows of what God created us to be. Fear can make us obsessively protective of what we have, and reactively distrustful of others. Fear nurtures the suspicion and cynicism that lead us to act in ways that are

mean-spirited and downright anti-neighborly. Fear can drive us to make demands of others for our own security rather than faith making us ready to serve others with confidence and humility. Fear can drive us to hide in false certainties rather than be ready to explore questions that, when addressed faithfully, can embolden our witness, release our imaginations, deepen our faith, and strengthen our courage.

So what fears, if any, do you hold for this assembly? Please take a moment to offer them silently before God in prayer and allow God to hold them rather than let them hold you.

Ironically, one fear I have had is that I would speak too long about fear. Why? Because while fear is real, it is not the full story—neither in the place where the disciples gathered, nor in this place, in this assembly. There is more to the story, more waiting to be told. If we are to be true to the witness of the Scripture, if the stories you and I tell of this week are to be faithful and true, then we will tell the story of Jesus Christ, who is present in this place, in this assembly.

Can you believe it? It is just as true for us as when the risen Christ just showed up in the midst of his terrified disciples. John writes, "Jesus came and stood among them." No picture of Jesus standing at the door knocking, waiting to be invited in. No evidence of Jesus putting his ear to the wall, listening to see if his disciples could come to agreement on the theory of atonement that would rightly explain the significance of Jesus' death. No hint that the disciples were even expecting Jesus. Just, "Jesus came and stood among them." How audacious. How gracious. We should not be surprised. This has been John's witness throughout his Gospel, for he wrote, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. [. . .] And the Word became flesh and lived among us . . . full of grace and truth." (John 1:1, 14).

This is John's witness, the story that he tells. Jesus came into the world, not by invitation, but out of the Father's love. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life" (John 3:16). This is John's witness. Jesus, now raised from the dead, liberated from the tomb, returns to that tomb-like upper room to reclaim his people, still captive to the bonds of fear and death.

Yes, yes. This is the story that is waiting to be told about us also, in this place and time, in this assembly. The crucified and risen Christ is present here. Jesus comes and stands among us.

No rules need to be proposed, debated, amended, or adopted to determine whether and on what terms Christ will be present among us. Christ is here because Christ is faithful to his word of promise. Christ is present where he promises—in the Word proclaimed, bread broken, wine poured, baptism remembered. This is the story that is waiting to be told. The crucified and risen Christ is present here both in promised and surprising places, even in unexpected faces.

And where Christ is present, there is peace. When Jesus came to the disciples gathered in fear, he stood among them saying, “Peace be with you.” Oh, yes, it was an ordinary greeting of the day: Salaam. Shalom. Peace. But it was also Christ’s most extraordinary gift.

I hear Jesus’ announcement of peace first as absolution. It is Jesus saying to his disciples, “Although you betrayed me, denied me, abandoned me, and you were completely thick-headed, self-serving, gutless wonders right to the end, and I justifiably could punish you or, better yet, abandon you and start over with a new and improved twelve, I am here in peace. I remain faithful to you, forgiving you as I have before, with renewed life, in a way you’ve never seen before.”

Oh, yes, sisters and brothers, let this be our witness. Where the crucified and risen Christ is present, there is forgiveness of sin, there is peace, and there is joy.

It was not until Jesus showed the disciples the marks of his crucifixion that their fear turned to joy. May it be so in our witness this week: that through eyes of faith we “see” the wounds in Jesus’ hands and side and realize that our self-emptying God would rather die than be in the sin-accounting business. It is the joy that flows forth when the lush grace of God washes over you in the proclamation that you are the beloved of God. The wounds of Jesus’ crucified body, risen from the dead, become our testimony that God is mercifully present in the midst of struggle and sin, suffering and death, to bring healing and hope, living faith, and deep joy. This is not the story of the elation or relief that some might feel if on the prevailing side of assembly actions. The joy of our witness, the story of Jesus Christ waiting to be told, is the joy of which Jesus spoke to his disciples before his death, “I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete” (John 15:11).

This joy is not a distant fiction or an unrealistic hope, neither in our lives nor the life of the ELCA. As we walked into the Superdome for the Youth Gathering, New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin stopped me. It was obvious that he was deeply moved by the joyful singing and dancing of the 37,000 participants. “Oh, bishop,” he said placing his arm around my shoulders, “how the people of New Orleans need to hear these joyful sounds. For this dome holds so many painful memories of the aftermath of Katrina: memories of devastation and separation, memories of death and despair. Oh, bishop, our whole city needs to experience the healing that the joyful witness of these youth brings.”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, who might be waiting for such a witness from us this week? Let this be our testimony: the crucified and risen Christ is the source of our joy.

He is also the source of our peace, for where Christ is present, there is peace. The peace of Christ that Joseph Sittler said is both rest and movement. Listen to Sittler:

When the world is regarded as a succulent resource to be squeezed for its juice of joy, it turns out to be a thief, a liar, a cheat. When the world is received as a gift, a grace, an ever-astounding wonder, it can be rightly enjoyed and justly used. The peace of God as rest, whose gift is to have no anxiety, fulfills itself in the peace of God as movement which goes out with holy concern about everything. The peace of God as rest in God’s acceptance of a person is not a knowledge that the world can give, is not in fact concerned with the world at all. But this same peace knows that the peaceless world is precisely the place for working out of God’s will for truth, justice, purity, beauty.<sup>1</sup>

And it is into the peaceless world—the world that crucified Jesus—that the risen Christ sends his fearful, yet joyful, disciples. And into that world Christ sends you and me and all gathered for this assembly. But not on our own and not all alone. “As the Father has sent me, so I send you” (John 20:21). When Jesus, the one who suffocated on the cross, said this, he breathed on them, all of them, each one of them, and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit” (John 20:22).

In the New Orleans Superdome football dressing rooms, Youth Gathering staff had put up signs for those who would be speaking to and leading the 37,000 participants. They splashed one word on walls and in the tunnels: breathe, breathe, breathe, breathe. For when anxiety takes over, we often forget to breathe deeply in the Spirit, as if the wind has been knocked out of us, and our witness is diminished. May this be our witness throughout this week: We have gathered in the strong name of Jesus to breathe in the Holy Spirit deeply, for the Spirit was poured out in baptism upon each one of us—upon each one of us.

Please turn to the person next to you, invite them to “Breathe, breathe, breathe in the Holy Spirit.”

Our oldest granddaughter, Naomi, was born without a connected esophagus. It has since been surgically repaired, but during the first few months of her life, she could not breathe on her own. And neither can we who have gathered for this assembly.

Pope Benedict XVI describes the Holy Spirit as the church’s oxygen source. Paul reminds us that the Spirit helps us in our weakness, interceding with sighs too deep for words. Evidence will abound all week that the Holy Spirit is present, for in this place sins will be forgiven, faith confessed, baptism remembered, the Word engaged, the meal shared, prayers answered, diverse gifts offered, unity restored. And then, as the assembly draws to a close, we will be sent. We will be sent in the power of the Holy Spirit with the promise of the Gospel: that, for Jesus’ sake, God forgives sins. “Jesus breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are

<sup>1</sup>Joseph Sittler, *The Care of the Earth, and Other University Sermons*. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1964), p. 39.

forgiven and if you retain the sins of any they are retained” (John 20:23).

Doesn't that Gospel promise make you want to turn on your cell phone right now and call that family member or friend, that colleague or congregation member from whom you feel alienated? Perhaps you have exchanged harsh words. Perhaps you have carried feelings of resentment with you into this assembly. Don't you want to share the good news of forgiveness for Jesus' sake? So, why does it seem easier to hold on to resentments than to seek reconciliation? Why do we feel more secure locked in fear behind closed doors than sent into the world in the power of the Holy Spirit with the Good News of Jesus Christ? The Good News God is extravagantly rich in grace, forgiving sinners, reconciling the alienated, giving new life in Christ.

Yes, may this be our shared witness. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer reminds us, “[T]he very moment of great disillusionment with my sister or brother” becomes the moment to be taught “that both of us can never live by our own words and deeds, but only by that one Word and deed that really binds us together, the forgiveness of sins in Jesus Christ.”<sup>2</sup>

When Jesus sends us into the world with his breathed-on, breathed-in Spirit, we become the embodiment of forgiveness wherever we go in all our callings. More than forgetting past wrongs, forgiveness in Jesus is an embodied promise to hold on in love, whatever may come, in all our callings, in all the places where we live and serve. Forgiveness is the promise to remain present as the embodiment of Christ's peace. It is a promise even in and especially for the places where sin threatens to hold us captive in fear. Forgiveness is the promise that we remain connected to every human sister and brother in the joy, peace, hope, and love that lives in Jesus and therefore in us.

Oh yes, may this be our witness: the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America is a sent church. Sent in the power of the Holy Spirit. Sent to share the Good News and embody the forgiving presence of Jesus Christ. Sent to serve the Lord. Sent to remember the poor.

Please place your hand on someone's head as I pray for the anointing of the Holy Spirit upon our work and our witness. The Lord be with you. Let us pray: “Father in heaven for Jesus' sake, stir up in these women and men the gift of your Holy Spirit. Confirm their faith. Guide their lives. Empower them in their serving. Give them patience in suffering and bring them to everlasting life.”<sup>3</sup> Amen.

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<sup>2</sup>Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “Life Together,” in *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, vol. 5 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996) pp. 36–37.

<sup>3</sup>*Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, p. 236.

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