

**Installation of Bishop James Gonia
Presiding Bishop Mark S. Hanson
Denver, Colorado
September 23, 2012**

Isaiah 40: 21-24; 28-31
2 Corinthians 4: 1-7
John 15: 1-5

Grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus.

Interrogative. Declarative. Figurative. Not exactly a memorable outline for a sermon for such an auspicious occasion. I didn't see anyone reaching for their iPhones to tweet those. Jim, I don't recall you using those three words in any of your conversations or presentations to the synod assembly that called you to this office. Yet those forms of speech from the readings you have chosen for this day and even can be foundations for your ministry as bishop.

Interrogative. May questions always be part of your leadership, questions that reflect curiosity and openness, questions for learning, wisdom and discernment, but also questions God asks us through the Scriptures. Before I ask you questions regarding your intent to serve in the office of bishop, the prophet Isaiah asks questions of you and each one of us.

Did you hear his questions?

Isaiah asks, "Have you not known? Have you not heard? Has it not been told you from the beginning?" (NRSV Isaiah 40: 21)

Isaiah is saying, "Hello. Yo! Is anyone paying attention out there?" When the Nobel Laureate Saul Bellow died a few years ago, he was referred to in the New York Times obituary as being "A First-Class Noticer." The prophet Isaiah is asking you, Jim, and each of us, "Are you a first-class noticer?" It may seem like an easy question to which we respond, "Of course." But I am not so sure. Maybe it is just me, but it seems my ability to be a first-class noticer in the sense Isaiah is describing sometimes is inversely proportional to my being on sensory overload.

Oh, sure, I am always trying to pay attention. I was constantly paying attention to both the context for our visit and my iPhone—staying on Twitter, responding to e-mails, tracking the rising violent protests in the Middle East and following news apps as other protests increased in many places. Don't get me wrong—I believe social media are tools for ministry, even a way of paying attention and staying connected.

Yet Isaiah is asking, "Have you not known? Have you not heard? Have you been paying attention to something more than your immediate circumstance? Can you be other than self-absorbed? Do you recognize who this powerful God is and how this God is choosing to be present among us?"

Bishop Gonia, it may be one of the greatest opportunities and challenges you have in the office of bishop because people will be asking you questions and turning to you for answers. Maybe you can turn those expectations of answers from the bishop into invitations by asking questions of others. But you will also have marvelous opportunities to ask questions, even more to create space so that we might ponder the questions God asks us.

Copyright © 2012 Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). All rights reserved. This copyright notice must appear on all copies and reproductions. Copies may be produced for distribution within the ELCA by affiliated ELCA organizations.

I recall in the candidates' forum when you were elected, more than once you were asked a questions and you responded, "I really don't know much about that so I have much to learn from you and with you. Will you teach me?" When you meet with congregational councils, rostered leaders, call committees, deans or synod council, why not begin with a question such as, "What has the Holy Spirit been up to through your life, your ministry, your community?" Then listen and give time for reflection and response because the question will leave people uncomfortable.

Then let the question and conversation that follows frame your opening up to the Scriptures. For if we do not know the Scriptures, if we are not fluent in the first language of our faith, the language of Scripture, if we do not know the narrative of what God has been up to in the past and promises for the future, how will we discern what God is doing today in our lives and ministries. How will we ever answer Isaiah's question?

If our response to Isaiah's questions, "Have you not known? Have you not seen? Have you not heard?" is silence, if we are not first close noticers of God's presence, power and mercy, we surely will lose heart.

Yes Bishop Gonia, may your questions—God's questions—your interrogative speech always be inseparable from your clear declaration, your clear proclamation of what God is doing. Earlier in the 40th chapter of Isaiah, the prophet asks, "What shall I cry?" (NRSV Isaiah 40:6) May that question always shape your leadership. And the prophet says, "Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings, lift it up do not fear; say to the cities of Judah, 'Here is your God!'" (NRSV Isaiah 40:9)

Do not fear! When fear defines our lives, it closes us off to what God is doing, making us possessive of what we have, distrustful of others and downright anti-neighborly. Do not fear! Your God is here!

That is your declarative speech. The God who showed up in Jesus, lifting up his voice, healing the sick, befriending the outcast, forgiving the sinner, restoring the excluded to community, raising the dead, proclaiming Good News to those in poverty, announcing God's reign of mercy and justice.

Declare it. Here is your God! on the cross, enduring the shame, the public humiliation, the painful death.

Announce it. Here is your God! in the grave, descending to the dead. Jim, there is no place you will go in your proclaiming, your leading, your serving, your living or your dying where Jesus has not gone ahead of you.

Proclaim it. Here is your God! raising Jesus from the dead, lavishly pouring out the Holy Spirit upon you, each one of you, no matter what your perspective is in politics or your views on controversial issues in church or society.

Here is your God! in Jesus, present for you in words of promise. As a called and ordained minister of the church of Christ, and by his authority, I therefore declare to you the entire forgiveness of all your sins in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. You are forgiven. That's the word of promise you are given to declare, and the word is the event. You are forgiven. DO you realize the freedom that comes through the word of forgiveness? Freedom to be anointed by the spirit for a life of faith and for bold engagement in God's work of restoring community and setting the oppressed free and bringing Good News to those whom we shackle in the chains of poverty.

Here is your God, present for you in the bread broken, wine poured and words of promise as present as they can be made new this day. Oh, yes Bishop Gonia, sisters and brothers, we are as clear as Paul was clear when it comes to our declaration. We do not proclaim ourselves. We proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as slaves for Jesus' sake!

Are you still with me? Do you have the interrogative and the declarative down? Are you ready for the move to the conjunctive? Here it is, "Therefore, since" Therefore, since! Bishop Gonia, be attentive to conjunctions in your leading and proclaiming. "Therefore, since it is by God's mercy that we are engaged in this ministry, we do not lose heart." (NRSV 2 Corinthians 4:1) That conjunction "since" denotes a causal connection between God's mercy, our ministry and our hearts.

But we know that, don't we? More than once, Jim, I have heard you talk about a time in life when you were very aware that you were an earthen vessel, a clay jar, empty. You may not have used those exact words but the images of Paul that you have chosen tonight came to mind. Is there anyone here who does not know firsthand of what Paul speaks? If there is anything of which we are first class noticers, it is when our hearts break, when those vessels of our love are empty, when we become discouraged.

There is more than one way to lose heart, to become discouraged. In recent weeks, I have been in rural, small town and urban congregations with lay and rostered leaders. When I ask for descriptions of their ministry, I often hear disheartening words. "Well, our membership continues to decrease, worship attendance is down, we are aging with few younger families, our giving barely sustains the cost of keeping going."

There was the first call pastor who said how appreciative she was of her theological education at seminary, her candidacy committee, her internship congregation and how they have prepared her to be an evangelical leader with a passion for God's mission in a rapidly changing and increasingly diverse world. Then she said, "But someone forgot to prepare the congregation that that was the kind of pastor I was trained to be."

There are many understandable reasons to lose heart. You have experienced those in communities in your synod, the loss of homes to fire, crops to drought and the loss of lives to violence, like the theater shooting in Aurora. Don't forget, Paul did not deny or dismiss such realities. He wrote to the Corinthians, "We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed." (NRSV 2 Corinthians 4: 8-9) Last Sunday, I preached in a vibrant and growing church in Luzhou, China. I looked out over the congregation that filled the nave and the balcony. In the center sections were mostly elderly women, faithful Christians who had every reason to lose heart during the years of the Cultural Revolution. Their church building had been taken over by the government and turned into a prison. No doubt some of them and their family members had been imprisoned, perhaps for their Christian faith. Oh yes, they knew of what Paul spoke. They were afflicted in every way but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed.

How could that be? Only because it was by God's mercy that we engage in this ministry and entrust and hold the gospel, pass it on from neighbor to neighbor, often in hushed tones at risk of persecution, even death. How can it be? Because they knew as Paul knew, as you and I know, that we are always carrying in our bodies – not just our physical bodies – but this living body of Christ in which we are baptized, this body of

vines and branches, twisted and entwined with Jesus. We are always carrying in this body, the death of Jesus so that the life of Jesus may be made visible through us.

Up in the balcony in Luzhou were young people, high school age and young adults, who were leaning forward – literally leaning into the Gospel, the Good News of Jesus Christ we proclaim. They were holding cell phones, some texting during the sermon, longing for the word of God’s mercy that sets us free for lives of faith and lives of participating in God’s work of restoring community so we do not lose heart. Jim, you have witnessed such powerful testimony to God’s mercy and the power of proclaiming Christ in Madagascar, in West Africa, in Liberia and Sierra Leone, and places of internal turmoil and civil war. You know this treasure of the gospel we carry in our earthen vessels.

When we begin to lose heart, or as Parker Palmer says, when our hearts break, one of two things can happen. Our hearts can break into shards, leaving us bitter, shattered, resentful and even sometimes, in a tragic way, joyful over the suffering of another. Or when our hearts break, will it break open, opening us to the suffering of others, to the mercy of God, present in Jesus’ suffering, death and resurrection. Will it open you to be a community that bears together the death of Jesus so that the life of Jesus may be made visible.¹ What will it be for you – in your ministry, in your congregation and in your community?

Walter Brueggemann, in his latest book on preaching, says that over and over in the Old Testament before the community of God’s people was ready to receive God’s mercies that are new every morning, they had to publicly lament their losses, cry out to God, often in anger, just as God sometimes cried out in anger at God’s people. This lamenting loss led to communal relinquishment – to letting go to what Jesus described in the parable as pruning the vineyard and becoming open to God’s mercies every morning. It may be one of the most significant acts of pastoral ministry in which you engage, Jim. To invite and let communities publicly lament their losses and then to have the courage to ask the hard question of what you now need to relinquish so that God’s mercies may be made new every morning. You will only have the courage to lament the losses and relinquish and prune if you entrust yourself to the promise of Jesus.

I am the vine, you are the branches. Abide in me as I abide in you. (NRSV John 15: 5) That finally is the figurative speech Jesus uses to invite us all to make our home, our abode, a home in Jesus Christ as Jesus abides and makes his home in us. Your hearts’ true home is with Jesus, the embodiment of God’s mercy for a world filled with discouragement, feelings of being abandoned and rootless. There is horrific evil out there in the world that breaks into our lives. Those places are not home for your heart. God’s mercy in Jesus is. That is why we do not lose heart. That’s why you won’t lose heart in this office, Jim. When Jesus makes his home in your heart, there are no lost causes in ministry. When Jesus’ word of forgiveness and God’s promise of reconciliation and restoration of community live in you, your heart is not lost. It lives with renewed vitality, hope and courage. Your strength will be renewed. You will run and not be weary. You will walk and not faint. (NRSV Isaiah 40: 31) So here’s one thing, Jim, you need not ever question. This ministry upon which you now embark comes to you because of God’s mercy. Amen.

¹ Parker Palmer, *Healing the Heart of Democracy: The Courage to Create a Politics Worthy of the Human Spirit*, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011) 22.