

“WHAT DO WE BELIEVE”
LAITY ADDRESS FOR

ANNUAL CONFERENCE
SATURDAY, MAY 22, 2010

Bishop Johnson, Cabinet, Members of Annual Conference and visiting friends, Good Morning. I would like to recognize the persons that are standing with me this morning, Director of CSM, Dean of Lay Academy, President of UMW, President of UMM and President of Youth. Also, I would like to recognize my colleagues of the PenDel Annual Conference.

The message is taken from the book of Ezekiel 37: 1-14 **“What Do You Believe”**

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart is acceptable to you this day in the name of Jesus I pray.

I want to share a story about a man that wanted to break the bond of gravity. He wanted to be able to fly to soar like a bird, but the problem was in his day there were no flying machines, no air planes and no helicopters he was a dreamer, but born much too soon.

He was very success in making artificial limbs. He made life comfortable for a lot of people. He wanted to do something for himself. When he had some free time, he constructed a set of wings for himself. Well, the day soon came for him to try out these wings. He called some of his friends to come watch, they did and was very please at what they saw. They went back and shared with the people of the town that Hans was flying. Has you can guess the word had gotten out around town that Hans was flying.

The people of the village notified the King, the Bishop and all the people of the village to come watch this historical moment. The location that Hans and his friends had selected for Hans to fly was on a hill near the water. This was an excellent choice for him. When the King and his court arrived, the crowd was so large the King asked Hans to change location so the people would be able to see. Hans was reluctant, but obeyed the orders of the King. Well, would you know Hans jumped and land straight in the water like a rock? The King was disappointed and the Bishop was mortified.

Guess what the bishop preached the next Sunday; man was not meant to fly. Hans believed him. He put away his wings and never again tried to fly. He died later, gripped by gravity, buried with his dreams.

What do we believe to be true about ourselves?

As you may know the press has not been good about Mainline Protestant churches. What have you heard? We hear things like we are bleeding members. We are growing older. We are not the mainline church but the sideline church. We are a dying denomination.

Diana Butler Bass did a research project on growing protestant churches. Much of her findings are found in a book called "Christianity for the Rest of Us ". She said we have been told a story that we have accepted to be true. And the story goes like this: We are the Titanic. We have hit an iceberg... whatever that iceberg is... membership is in decline, political conflict, and we are sinking. And there is no turning this ship around. And it feels like all we are doing is rearranging the deck chairs on the titanic. As leaders we are anxious and depressed. Who wants to be the captain of the Titanic? Despair is the name of this story.

Yet, there is another story out there about our churches. I like the way Lyle Schaller has coined it. He says some of our churches think if they just wait long enough 1950 will return tomorrow. You know those churches that say if the Bishop and the D.S. would just give them a younger pastor with a family, or if they could have a dynamic youth minister we will grow, but at the same time the average member in the church is over 60 years old.

Those are the churches that tell wonderful stories about the chicken dinners, fall bazaars, but give you a blank look when you bring up the subject of evangelism or how they are changing lives. These are the churches that say they want to grow, but unwilling to change anything. They are in a river of denial.

So what do we believe to be true about ourselves?

Ezekiel live in a time when people were either in denial or despair. His iceberg was Babylonian invasion of Israel. He was a prisoner of war. Some of the people were in denial. They could not believe that this was God judgment, that something this bad could happen to them, they wanted to believe that somehow someday this would be over soon; God would not leave them in exile. What Ezekiel needed to say to them was wake up and see what is around you? This is reality. We got ourselves here because we forgot who we were as people of God, and we stopped trusting God.

For the past few years, I have felt like Ezekiel. I have seen churches going on with business as usual, and I kept looking at the bottom line, thinking we got a problem. My sisters and brothers wake up there is something not right with this mix.

I would to live to see the day when folks will wake up on Sunday morning, saying Lord I want to make disciples for Jesus Christ, I better get to church. Wake up church, don't you get? We have lost our sense of identity about what it means to be the church, and we are living in a time when it seems nobody really cares about the United Methodist Church.

So, what do we believe to be true about ourselves?

The fundamental question is do we believe that God is alive, active and at work in our world?

Do we expect God to do great things among us?

Are we convinced that the church is of God, and will be preserved to the end of time?

We have always been a people of another story. Jesus crucified and buried, and then the resurrection. The disciples gathered in the upper room, Jesus gone to pray, and then the spirit. There was Sara and Abraham old and barren, but then a child, Moses and the Israelites starving in the wilderness then there was bread from heaven, Daniel in the lion's den then there was an angel. Ezekiel and the people in exile then came a vision and a promise of return.

All we have to do my friends is trust God. Yes, this is reality, and we need to face reality. We are not getting back the church we use to be or the world we use to live in. But there is another story. There is a God. And God is not done with us yet. Dry bones listen to the message of God.

I know that I serve a risen God, one who will be there for me, when things start to look dark and lonely for me I turn to 27 Psalm "The Lord is my light and my salvation whom shall I fear" Church God has plenty there is never a shortage, just trust him. We will be able to pay our apportionments, grow our churches without any problems, and just trust him

So what do we believe to be true about ourselves?

Do we believe God is not done with us yet? Do we believe that all things are possible with God? Do we believe that we are the people of God, that we are indeed Easter people, risen to a new life, filled with the fullness of Christ? If we believe that to be true, then what is keeping us from living large, risking more, imagining more, trying more, dreaming more?

Here is what I believe to be true. We can't just sit here, God wants us to fly. To fly free of yesterday's this is how we have always done it before. To fly free of today's paralysis on the shrinking numbers and the waning influence. To fly free of tomorrow's uncertainties about what will the church of the 21st century look like. We just don't know. But what we do know is the spirit and the breath of God continues to breathe life into us. We do live, we will live and there is hope. It is a promise and it's a proven reality. Dry bones listen to the message of God. That is what I believe. We need to see as God sees. We need to start telling a different story because we have a different story to tell. We have a God who longs to set us free of our denial and despair so we can fly, fly into a future that is bright, amazing, and full of adventure, more than we can even imagine or able to ask for.

God has said it, God will do it. But on our own we can do nothing. But with God, we can do all things through him who strengthen us. Church let us keep the faith. God bless you.