

2020 Great Plains Annual Conference Opening Worship Service

"The Power of a Great Gap Story"

Acts 1:1-5

Friday, May 29, 2020

Acts 1:1-5 - In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. After his suffering he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the Kingdom of God. While staying with them, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father. "This," he said, "is what you have heard from me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now."

Message:

Friends, may the peace of Christ that surpasses all understanding be with your spirit on the eve of our revised 2020 Great Plains Annual Conference Session.

I want to talk to you about the imaginative power of a good gap story.

Good stories are potent drivers of creativity and action. They influence, teach, and inspire. A good story conveys complex ideas in ways that are easy to grasp. They forge connections among people and between people and ideas.

Good stories convey culture, history, truths, and values that unite us with each other.

And friends, as Christians, we have quite a story to tell. It is the Greatest Story Ever Told.

But before I get into that, I would like to begin tonight's episcopal address by recognizing and congratulating all of our Great Plains graduating high school seniors, college students, and seminarians as well as your families and friends. We all acknowledge and celebrate your achievement. We trust that you will use your education to make a decent living for yourself and your loved ones but that as disciples of Jesus Christ, your work will be an expression of your Christian vocation to serve humanity and the higher good for the glory of God.

Next, I join with all of the people in the Great Plains of Kansas, Nebraska, America, and the whole world to acknowledge and thank all of our frontline and essential workers, especially our United Methodists. You have taken courageous risks and made personal sacrifices over the past two months to care for the public's health, safety, and wellbeing during the coronavirus pandemic. Thank you!

This pandemic has been extremely difficult financially on our farmers, ranchers, business owners, and many of our households. Over 80% of the Nebraska and Kansas businesses have been negatively affected by the COVID-19 crisis and the resulting loss of traffic and sales. The impact of the crisis touches every part of Nebraska and Kansas and every industry. There have been lost revenue and spikes to unemployment. But everywhere, businesses and organizations are doing all they can to keep people employed, the economy going, and services extended to our communities.

The COVID-19 pandemic has created tremendous and, at times, unbearable personal and familial disappointments, heartaches, worries, pressures, and frustrations.

Midwesterners are resilient, faithful, and hopeful people. The generations before you have overcome so much, and you will overcome the impact of this pandemic as well because that is what you do.

As Christians, we face life's crisis with the certainty that when we reach the limits of our human capacity to bear the weight of difficult challenges and seasons, the Spirit of God draws near to us and offers us blessed rest, courage, and strength to endure.

The Great Gap Story: Tonight's reading from the book of Acts is part of Luke's grand story that picks up where his gospel is left off.

Luke continues to tell Theophilus, and the whole world, the story of the spiritual birth of the Church that rapidly spread like a prairie wildfire across nations, creeds, language, race, and cultures so that all may know peace with God and neighbor.

The apostle Peter explains to Cornelius and his family how the spark of the fire of God was lit when God sent Jesus to the world with a message of peace. He tells it like this:

The message of God's peace spread throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John announced. Jesus, God's messenger, was anointed by God with the Holy Spirit and with power. He went about Judea and Jerusalem doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. He was put to death by hanging on a tree. But God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear (Acts 10:36-43).

The first verses read tonight, focus on the forty gap days between the resurrection of Jesus Christ and his ascension back to God.

During the forty gap days, he was present and active in the hearts, minds, and imagination of his disciples.

The gap days between the resurrection and the ascension were a season of discontinuity between what was and what could be. It was a season that disrupted life as usual and created a

time and space to step back, reflect, discern, and reimagine what the world could look like in light of the resurrection.

Glimpses of the Kingdom in Luke / Acts: Jesus spent 40 days talking with his disciples about the Kingdom of God to come (Acts 1:3). Imagine that! Jesus painted a future of a world very different than the one they knew. It was a vision of the Kingdom that invited imagination and exploration of a new world to come; enormously bigger than what they thought was possible and much grander than their capacity to bring it about.

We get a glimpse into what that Kingdom of God looks like by merely reading the stories in the gospel of Luke.

In the gospel of Luke, we find the dynamic power of the Holy Spirit, connected with prayer, birthing the Kingdom through Christ, and the witness of the Church.

Luke's gospel tells an overarching story of the Holy Spirit at work, guiding the course of salvation history from Israel, the period of Jesus, and the period of the Church.

The Kingdom of God is present and coming. It is already in us in the form of a mustard seed, and it is coming with great glory. It approaches us, and we approach it.

We know the Kingdom of God is present when people confess Jesus is the Christ, are baptized, and connect in prayer with God.

We see signs of the inbreaking of God's Kingdom when we read stories of people who are lost and found.

We see signs of the inbreaking of God's Kingdom when we read stories of forgiveness and restoration.

We see signs of the inbreaking of God's Kingdom when we read that Jesus seeks the outcasts and welcomes them.

We see signs of the inbreaking of the Kingdom when the poor and the vulnerable are treated with respect, and they are known by the powerful to be essential people loved by God.

We see signs of the inbreaking of God's Kingdom when people are joyful because they know they are safe with God, welcomed by God, and connected to God's eternal love and life.

We see signs of inbreaking of God's Kingdom when we see the gospel of Christ cancels sin, brings new life, and health and peace. We see the inbreaking of God's Kingdom when national, racial, creedal boundaries are transcended, uniting thousands of voices to sing our great Redeemer's praise, the glory of his majesty, and the triumph of his grace.

These are the stories and illustrations that point to fulfillment of life in God's Kingdom that Jesus envisioned when he taught his disciples to pray:

Our Father, in Heaven, hallowed be your name, your Kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. This day, give us our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. For yours is the Kingdom, the power, and the glory forever.

God Has Our Attention: In this time of the pandemic, we have been given a gift to claim what is important in our lives and to think about what we need to keep, what we need to let go of, and what we need to change.

Some of us have realized just how disconnected we had become from our children, our family, and our friends. Some of us have realized that the life we were living was driving us to exhaustion. As a church, we have found ways to connect with a world that was waiting for us to be the Church of mercy and love.

Glimpses of God's Kingdom through the work of our clergy, laity, and congregations: Our churches are telling good stories of hope and of what the world could be. These stories are lived out in so many ways throughout our conference.

For example:

The people of Colby Kansas baked treats to thank essential workers and truck drivers.

At Faith Westwood UMC in Omaha, members sewed more than 10,000 masks.

Our young people have prepared food sacks to give to hungry people.

In Longford, Kansas, church members sorted food to distribute to the south half of Clay County.

The bells at Wichita Chapel Hill ring nightly to honor first responders.

Lincoln St. Mark's partnered with local businesses and another church to sew much-needed masks for healthcare workers.

Silver Lake, Kansas, made and left sack lunches outside the church doors to be available to the public.

Osmond, Nebraska, rings their church bells twice a day as a reminder to the community to pray.

In Melvern, Kansas, the Church purchased gift cards to the town's only café to keep it going.

Hanscom Park in Omaha donated toilet paper to a homeless organization.

Grace Woods, a student at Wesley-KU, leads an online yoga class.

Neil and Bridget Gately, serving in Norfolk, NE, reach out to the community by giving a history of hymns.

Clergy throughout the Great Plains are reaching out to members – including kids – via ZOOM.

Manhattan First turned their choir robes into much needed Personal Protection Equipment for hospital employees.

Many of our churches are offering a steady supply of food to the hungry such as Prairie Village, Grand Island Trinity in Nebraska, Seward, and Central City.

Churches all across our conference are forcefully responding to the spiritual hunger and questions people in our communities have by offering God's means of grace through online worship services, bible studies, singing sessions, devotionals, prayer, and spiritual counseling.

Regardless of how difficult the time we live in, we can begin to imagine and prepare for a new way of being the Church when we move past the pandemic.

The Great Realisation: Actors, singers, athletes, and clergy are reading children's books and telling stories to online audiences at bedtime. The bedtime stories provide comfort and reassurance to children and families coping with the impact of COVID-19. Storytelling is a healthy response to ended school years. They serve as a distraction from swirling unrest in people's lives. They inspire a love of reading and books. And, they open up imaginations to new possibilities.

Reading books to children is vital because it builds relationships through stories that can lead to a discussion about all sorts of things, old and new, trivial and serious, mundane, and mysterious that then opens up deeper understanding and new horizons.

One new bedtime story that has gone viral is titled the "New Realisation," by Tomos Roberts, a spoken word poet from London. The poem posted as a video to YouTube on April 29. As of May 12, the video has been viewed over 30 million times across all platforms.

The New Realisation poem is a story about a post-COVID world that learned from its mistakes. A new world is reimagined. The story is profound, beautiful, and, most importantly, hopeful. The story pushes us to think about a new future as we take the time in this dark moment to make good decisions that would liberate us to reimagine and reconstruct a new world that is more connected and more humane for all people, especially the most vulnerable.

So much has changed in the past few months, hasn't it?

The coronavirus has awoken the deepest part of our faith, our hope, and our love for God, for each other, and our neighbors.

We have found out things about our capacity to do what only dreamt of doing but kept putting off for another day. We have found the boldness to preach on social media platforms, the creativity to respond, and resourcefulness to continue ministry in new and exciting ways. We found our identity as God's missionary people and a community of faith. We found out what it means to love one another, bear one other's burdens, pray for each other, and encourage each other. We found out what it means to care for the sick, the lonely, the isolated, and vulnerable. We found out that our resources in God are limitless.

Even though so much has changed, one thing has not. The Holy Spirit is a work in this gap time. We are not alone. We are walking with each other through this. We are walking with our neighbors near and far. And we are walking with God through this present but temporary and unprecedented season of uncertainty.

God's Story of the Kingdom to Compels Us to Move Forward: We keep walking forward because it's the story of God's new world that gives us the courage to continue with faith, hope, and love.

It is the story of what God is doing in our world and wants to do through Christ followers that inspires our imagination for what is possible.

The story of God's coming reign gently invites us to think about a new future. Now is the time to make decisions that will liberate us to reimagine and reconstruct a new world that is more connected and more humane for all people, especially the most vulnerable.

The disciples found themselves in the gap between what was and was to come. I'm sure the vision of God's Kingdom Christ showed them excited and, at the same time, overwhelmed and worried them. How in the world were they ever going to get from where they were to where Christ was pointing them?

But Jesus says, don't worry, you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. And with that, Jesus ascended and left them to the mission at hand (Acts 1:6-8).

Thank you for all the ways you are telling the story of God's outreaching love through Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit in this gap time in your part of God's world through your prayers, presence, your gifts, your service, and your witness.

May the peace of Christ be with your spirit.

Rev. Dr. Ruben Saenz Jr.

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The United Methodist Church