

**53<sup>rd</sup> ANNUAL DIOCESAN CONVENTION BISHOP'S ADDRESS**  
**THE EPISCOPAL DIOCESE OF THE CENTRAL GULF COAST**  
**THE RT. REV. J. RUSSELL KENDRICK**  
**23 February 2024**

*Opening Prayer*

*O God of unchangeable power and eternal light: Look favorably on your whole Church, that wonderful and sacred mystery; by the effectual working of your providence, carry out in tranquility the plan of salvation; let the whole world see and know that things which were cast down are being raised up, and things which had grown old are being made new, and that all things are being brought to their perfection by him through whom all things were made, your Son Jesus Christ our Lord; who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.*

This is one of my favorite Collects from the Prayer Book. It boldly awakens us to God's work of transformation in the world - "let the whole world see and know that things which were cast down are being raised up, and things which had grown old are being made new". And too, it bids the church to join God in carrying out the plan of salvation which involves transformation. And that of course, is the theme of our convention. "Be Transformed".

Before I get ahead of myself - Welcome to the 53<sup>rd</sup> Convention of the Diocese of the Central Gulf Coast! To lay delegates, whether you volunteered, were elected, bribed, begged, or you were the only person to raise your hand, thank you for giving your time to be here. To the clergy, thank you for keeping your commitment to be here. It is a stormy time, and yet week after week you call on us from the winds and waves of this world to follow Jesus. You dare to give us God. Thank you! To our visitors, exhibitors, spouses, and folks of St. Paul's, Daphne, there are plenty of places you could be this morning and a lot of things for you to do, and yet you are here! To one and all, thank you for who you are and the life you are trying to live. God did a mighty fine thing when He made you and gave you to this world. Let's never forget that.

It is good to be here. It really is good to be here. If you are not fully convinced about that then lean on the enthusiasm of a second-time delegate that I sat with during a recent visit. She was absolutely giddy about being here, and in a very energetic childlike tone, she told me so: "I am so excited about going to Convention." I paused from eating my Publix chicken tender meal and replied: "Really?". I mean honestly, I don't very often get that kind of delight when it comes to being at Convention; and she just kind of burst out "yes! I get to be with my people!"

Look around. Here are your people! Here is your church! You are the diocese! And from the letters I get each week from those who are choosing to claim this messy room of the Episcopal Church as their spiritual home, my new friend is not alone in her delight. We may not be the mega church in town; We may not be the hippest church in town; But we are a haven for people who yearn to know that the power of grace is real and that it is meant for them too!

This is the ninth time I have addressed you as your Bishop. Every year this event takes a lot of time, from a small group of people. This year it's been the folks here at Saint Paul's and those who work for you every day as the Diocesan staff. Please join me in thanking them.

Our theme is "Be Transformed". Short and sweet. No, it is not really short, nor is it sweet. It is audacious. It may even be absurd. We live in a stormy time. It is a noisy time. The world is a mess. People seem to have lost the ability to truly hear each other. Many no longer dare to call on God. And many no longer can even hear their own souls. And those who have no strength to call out for help. Every one of us knows someone who is living in the storm of depression and anxiety. And too, creation herself is moaning, and not because something is about to be born but because our resources are being depleted and squandered. And by many accounts, the church we have known is crumbling.

And yet, our world is not unlike the world of Isaiah whom we heard in our first reading. This is actually the third Isaiah - But we don't have time for background. This reading comes on the heels of the exile when the Babylonians invaded Jerusalem, ransacked every building, and destroyed the temple of God. Then, after the total destruction, there was total humiliation. The Babylonians marched out most of the citizens of Jerusalem across the Jordan River and into Babylon to live as refugees. Can you imagine that? Being forced to leave everything behind - your home, your land, your temple, your ability to keep your religion, the very pulse of your identity? And in leaving all that, they felt that God had left them too. God seemed silent.

That silence goes on for some 50 years. The silence is finally broken by the Persian King Cyrus who defeats the Babylonians and decrees that the exiled Israelites can go home, back to Israel to start over again. But ya'll know starting over again is hard. There was so much lost. In addition to the traumatic memories of the past, there were land disputes between families. There were power struggles between tribal leaders and theological bickering between religious leaders. Imagine that! And maybe the worst part of it, when they got back to Israel, they still had no temple, which meant they had to reimagine and recreate their religion. Because of that, many people had given up on God.

That's where today's reading picks up. The restoration of Jerusalem to its past glory was clearly not happening as they had hoped. Isaiah is lamenting for God to intervene, pleading for God to do something, begging for God to happen, until the most gut-wrenching & agonizing verse: "There is no one who calls on your name or attempts to take hold of you; for you have hidden your face from us and have delivered us into the hand of our iniquity."

Then hundreds of years later, in our second reading, we meet up with that rag tag group of followers and their young leader named Jesus. They are caught in a literal storm of waves and wind. But might we allow our sanctified imaginations to see this too as a statement of our world. It's a stormy time, and we too can be tossed around by the winds of fear and anxiety that we know in our very soggy weary flesh and blood. And while you look marvelous this morning, are there not days, weeks, months, and even longer that we are hunkered down in the nave of our churches, wondering if we will survive?

Be transformed! Really? Yes! How? I don't pretend to fully know. One thing I have learned as a Bishop, is that my funny hat is not supercharged with intelligence and intuition. And, my staff, as much as I want them to be, are not a magic wand. So, I do not know all the answers, but I do have a question to point the way. It's a question best described in this brief video: <https://youtu.be/1ytFB8TrkTo>.

**"When you know your Why, your What becomes more impactful."** So let me ask you the question. **What is your Why?** And for the sake of this moment, **what is your Why for your church?** What is the purpose that energizes us and compels us to join God in the work of transformation in the world?

When the question of why is asked of Episcopalians, the answer is usually "Well that's the way we have always done it". In other words, **our Why** is reduced to a kind of preservation of the past. I was at one of our churches when this became real. I was standing in the Parish Hall and looking at the bulletin board; I noticed a faded letter I wrote to the Diocese in 2017! That was seven years ago! It was like scales suddenly falling from my eyes, and when your eyes are opened, there is no going back. The next week when I was back at my office, I noticed in the hallway of the diocesan office the 60+ black and white photos of the buildings in our diocese. Photos taken some 30 years ago. **Why?**

**What is our why?** Think of your buildings. How often do we ever take something down or move something around? Clergy are getting twitchy right now. What about our choices for worship and the ministries in which we are involved and how we spend our resources? Is our **Why** to simply keep the peace or merely preserve the past?

Then again, if our **Why** is not to preserve the past, it's often self-preservation. **What is our why?** And the answer is, "to fill up the pews; keep the doors open". But if our purpose is reduced to a bottom line, then our goal is to make enough interactions with people to keep the doors open.

Preservation or interaction? Are these truly our why? What **Why** might we cultivate that would so energize us and transform us like the man in the video?

If our **Why** can somehow move us into transformation, then nothing about our systems and structures are too much of a sacred cow to hold onto. What might it look like for us to truly examine what we do and how we do it, in a way meant for transformation versus preservation?

Brian McLaren captures it this way: "We have the crises of the planet, poverty, peace; the fourth crisis is religion because all too often our religious communities are remaining on the sidelines. As Thomas Merton said, they're 'guilty bystanders.' I think much religion has been selling people an evacuation plan rather than helping them participate in a transformation plan."

**What is our transformation plan?** I am suggesting that such a plan begins with knowing your **Why**; and to find a **Why** that inspires you and energizes you. And to take us a step further, I believe such a transformation plan involves two important keystones of faith demonstrated in Peter and Isaiah----**reach out and see. Hold on and be formed.**

**Let's first return to Peter.** When Peter is focused on Jesus, he defies gravity. In some weird way, he is transformed. But the instant he remembers the wind, he starts to sink. His fear returns, the same fear that kept the rest of the gang hunkered down inside the boat.

Peter is the church! Everywhere I go I'm asked questions focused on preservation and self-preservation - How do we not drown? How do we survive? And when I hear such questions, I will confess, I feel myself sinking. Peter is scared to death of death. And sometimes we are that scared too. Peter is momentarily consumed by his own desperate need for self-preservation. And sometimes too is the church. We get so focused on the waves and winds, we can no longer focus on Jesus. And yet, Peter reaches out. He reaches out for Jesus. And we are called to reach out too.

To be clear, our reaching for Jesus is not to simply defy gravity. It is about reaching for Jesus so that we can see above the waves just enough to see the horizon of the world around us. To reach out for Jesus in our neighborhood and to our neighbors. To reach out for Jesus to those hunkered down and hampered by the waves and wind. To reach out and call forth people beyond the limits of their fear, and the scarcity of self-preservation imbues in our hearts. But reaching for Jesus also means letting go, including letting go of the boat itself. Yes, possibly even to let go of our buildings; trusting that God will provide for us.

**And then there is Isaiah.** As Isaiah sinks into the depths of defeat and despair, he holds on. Amidst so much lament, so much distress, only then is the most remarkable line, a very small thought on which so much of faith rests: "Yet, O LORD, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand."

"Yet, O Lord." Or maybe a bit smoother translation for our modern ears: "and yet". "And yet...O Lord." There may not be as many of us who do believe. And there may not be much of a reason for any of us to believe. But there are still those of us who will believe! And we will believe even when there is not much to hold on to - Lord, we hold to you; "And Yet O lord, you are our Father. We are clay, use us, mold us."

This is faith that believes in God when we cannot sense God - "And yet O Lord". This is the faith that will not be discouraged by despair or give into bitterness. This is the faith that reminds us to be open to being shaped and molded and formed. And in turn, be transformed. Your presence here is evidence of that kind of faith in you.

Hold on and be formed! Hold on to who you are and whose you are! Remember that we are God's people and God is holding us!

Hold on and be formed! Reach out and see! Might those be keystones for a transformation plan and pointing us to knowing more deeply our **Why?**

We will spend some time with these ideas during our convention. To guide us are Dr. Lisa Kimball and The Rev. Dr. Tricia Lyons. Lisa is a guru of formation, knowing more deeply and fully what it means to hold on and be shaped as the people of God. Tricia is the wizard. Yes, I said wizard. Wizard of all things reaching out to see Jesus in the world. They will teach us. They will challenge us. And if we allow it, through them, God will transform us, right smack in the middle of a business meeting!

Before I wrap up this address, I want to witness to the work of transformation. I do see things that were old that are being made new. I see things that were cast down that are being raised up. I see people reaching out for Jesus in the world. I see people holding on to what matters and being shaped and transformed. **I see it in you. ....!**

I am thinking of the people who have been and are being shaped and transformed by way of our School for Ministry. When we started this endeavor, there were some 20 dioceses utilizing non-traditional local methods to form those for ordained ministry. Today, there are some 89 dioceses doing this in some way! Whether a traditional path or a local one, the commitment of those being formed deacons or priests is humbling. And the commitment is true of our lay leaders too! Joy will tell you more about that later today.

But let me share one story. I teach the class for Lay Worship Leaders. We meet monthly on a Saturday, 8 times and 4 hours each time. Last Friday I received an email from one of my students. She was in Birmingham caring for her newborn grandchild because her daughter was in the hospital. "I may be late tomorrow morning because I will be driving back to Crestview and I don't want to miss class." Talk about holding on! This is one story of many. It is deeply humbling! Such commitment is transforming our churches!

I am thinking of our new relationship with Dwell Mobile, where we are reaching out to see and help those who have formally and legally come into our country as refugees, and finding ways to join them as they make a home in the US. You'll hear more later.

I am thinking of a group of people who are calling us to reach out and see creation and our role as the stewards of it. Later today we will be invited to affirm and join in their work by considering two resolutions from them. We live in a beautiful, and yet fragile, part of God's kingdom that includes what people call "America's Amazon". Holding on to the promise of God's blessing of goodness of all creation, and paying attention to how we tend to creation, is a vital part of our faith! As a part of this address, I do hereby name and certify their work as that of the **Diocesan Commission on the Integrity of Creation**.

I am thinking of those that you will hear about, who are reaching out to those who are harassed and hampered by mental health, pointing us to ways that we can hold on to them and find ways that our churches can be places of safety, education, and healing. I also hereby name and certify their work as the **Diocesan Mental Health Alliance**.

I see things being made new in the way people are reaching for new ways of being church. Take for example a new relationship between Trintiy, Apalachicola and St. Johns, Wewahitchka. They're actually joining together so that worship is extended and shared in a way that transcends the ways we have always done things!

Such reaching out for new ways of being the church means change. Some say we are tipping the rubrics by allowing lay worship leaders to extend communion to people, when a priest is unable to be present. For those who are unconvinced, I ask you to ponder this: If the Holy Eucharist is bound to the requirement of a priest being present for it to occur, then that means only the churches that can afford a priest can benefit from the sacrament. Does that not then make the

celebration of the Holy Eucharist an issue of justice? Those who can afford a priest are those who can afford the Eucharist?

Referring back to the challenge of letting go of the boat: We are doing that as we let go of Murray House. The world of health care and elder care was very different in 1996 when we took on Murray House as an agency of the Diocese. We are no longer equipped to continue that relationship. To be candid, it is sinking. So, we have just signed a letter of agreement for Murray House to be purchased and operated - under the same name - by a provider who does have the expertise and ability.

Finally, tomorrow you will hear a report and see pictures of the transformation going on at Beckwith Camp and Conference Center - that you made happen through the capital campaign! The old is truly being made new there!

Thank you for being here and for the time we will share together in the next two days. Even more, thank you for what you do when you go home!

“Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern the will of God.”

Do not be conformed to this world or by this world. Be transformed! Settle for nothing less! Church growth guru and Episcopalian Loren Mead once wrote: “We do not need a new set of programs. We need churches with a new consciousness of themselves and their task.”

That new consciousness is our **Why**. Take some time to discern the will of God and discover **Your Why**.

And, that the answer we discern so transforms our lives out there, that the whole world sees and knows that things which were cast down are being raised up, and things which had grown old are being made new in ways we may have never imagined or conceived....because with God, all things are possible!