

30th Annual Diocesan Convention Address

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St. George's Church, Germantown

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Do you know how to make holy water? Some say you just take some water, and then you boil the hell out of it. Actually, the process is more interesting. First you exorcise the water, and then you bless it. Next you exorcise salt (used for healing, purifying, preserving), and then you bless it. Finally, you co-mingle the salt with the water and ask another blessing. Voila! Holy Water.

Co-mingling. We also talk about co-mingling when we consider the Holy Eucharist. There is an old prayer that some priests say over the water that is mixed with the wine of the Eucharist: "Bless O God, this water in commixture with this wine that we may come to share in the divinity of Christ as he humbled himself to share in our humanity."

Co-mingling: This is what the readings are all about this evening and what the upcoming convention is all about in the days ahead. More importantly, beyond convention, co-mingling is about how will our humanity be mixed with Christ's divinity so that we might be about God's great project of creation each day?

John's Gospel proclaims: "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us." Co-mingled ... God... creation... creatures... a new beginning...What is the back story? In the act of cosmic creation, God's plan is revealed. The word became flesh and dwelt among us: Incarnatus. By tradition, at these words the worshipper would bow or genuflect.

Why should we not bow our heads, our knees, our hearts? We are walking on holy ground...God's green earth...God's ongoing creation. Yet, having bowed, what are we to do next?

e.e. cummings:

"I wake up each morning with a desire to **save** the world
and a desire to **savor** the world.
And it makes it hard to get much done."

Sit and savor...strive and save...Back and forth we go, like Adam and Eve who were described by one rabbi as "newly formed humans seeking their place in their new world. Under God's tutelage, (they) experiment with the boundaries set for them... totter(ing) back and forth, at first full of pride, then utterly humbled."

How human! How much like each one of us newly formed humans who must also seek our place in this era's newly formed world, a new world in which we have been placed, planted, tilled and taught. But it is **not** a world of our own choosing. We have been plopped down unceremoniously, and but for the grace of God, we could have been plopped down in some other place or time or set of circumstances. But here we are: newly formed in a newly formed world. We have had to come to learn this emerging reality over time. And what is one to do in such a new world, a world which we did not choose as much as it seems to have chosen us?

In her book, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, Annie Dillard speaks to this question. According to Dillard, "If we are going to know where we are, we have to explore the neighborhood." It sounds so obvious when we hear her say it, but how often we choose to not explore the neighborhood. Rather, we seek out safe places, known boundaries, familiar territory. Rather than explore, we cling to the known, rather than launch into space and meet the mysterious creation of God's playful imagination at work in the world about us.

"If we are to know where we are, we have to explore the neighborhood."

We may protest that we don't have to get out to know reality. We have been around the block. We can put ourselves in someone else's shoes. We are able to get inside their skin. Any excuse will do, rather than take the steps that will move us out of our comfort zone and into the mystery of God's creation. In fairness, I must acknowledge that even if we want to walk through someone else's neighborhood, we may find our new neighbors as hesitant to let us in as we are to wander around the edge of their property. Yet we are called to risk exploring if we want to know where we are on God's green earth.

We want to be able to “forecast” the future, to take control of the risk, to limit our exposure. But as Mark Twain once said, “Forecasting is difficult... especially about the future.” Providentially, our question is not “What does the future hold?” The Church’s question is “Who holds the future?” Though this should not be a difficult question for the Church to answer, it is not just a rhetorical question either.

Who holds the future? This is a question with life and death significance for those of us who have a suspicion that God has planted us here, and that this was done for some reason. To answer the question, “Who holds the future?” invites us to wonder if we really want to know the answer, because the answer has real life implications for how we live in the neighborhood of God’s own making.

What are these consequences? As we heard in last Sunday’s propers, to be on this earth is for believers a responsibility. It is a call to be “servants of Christ” and trustworthy “stewards” of God’s plan for the world. To know the answer to the question of who holds the future is to learn in time something about the neighborhood into which we have been placed, and to learn at least a strong hint about the work we have been given to do during our time on this fragile earth, our island home.

We are called to consider the design and desire of the God we meet so powerfully in James Weldon Johnson’s great poem “Creation,” with which we started tonight’s worship. We are to consider well what it means to be stewards of this God’s plan.

God who “Smiled and light broke rolling darkness up on one side” and causing light to stand shining on the other before He stood back and said, *“That’s good!”*

God who “reached out” and took the light in His hands, rolled the light around until He made the sun and with the light that was left over, He gathered it up in a shining ball and flung it against the darkness, spangling the night with the moon and stars.

And down between the darkness and the light, He hurled the world.

And God said, "*That's good!*"

God who "stepped down, and the earth was under His feet. And He walked, and where He trod, His footsteps hollowed the valleys out and bulged the mountains up.

God who "spat out the seven seas, clapped His hands, and the thunders rolled; And the waters above the earth came down; The green grass spouted; The red flowers blossomed; The pine tree pointed his finger to the sky" And the rainbow of hope appeared, curled around God's shoulders like a shawl.

God who "Raised His arm and waved His hand saying, '*Bring forth! Bring forth!*' And immediately fish and fowl, birds and beasts roamed creation. And God said, "*That's good!*"

God who "sat down on the side of a hill where He could think. And He thought and He thought, until He thought: "I will make a man!" And from the clay of the river bank, God kneaded damp dirt into a lump until He shaped it in His own image, breathed life into it, and man became a living soul.

Imago Dei... The image of God...

And it is in the image of this God that you and I have been created and placed on this, God's green earth. In the image of this God we are to live as co-creators in the endless cycle of new creation, as part-takers in God's plan for the world. And God's plan will not be finished until all things are made new.

What does it mean to be made in God's image?

Our Catechism is clear: To be made in God's image is to be made free to make choices. But not just any choices. To be made in God's image as we have been made means that we are free to make the following choices: to love, create and reason and to live in harmony with God and with Creation. When we do this we are living on purpose. We are living fully human lives. We are living in God's image. And our lives become a sign and covenant of

hope to the world into which we have been placed by God. A sign and covenant as much as that rainbow that wrapped around God's shoulders like a shawl that was given as a sign of hope for the world when it was recreated after the great flood.

Until we are clear about the nature of this God in whose image we have been made, we will not be able to forecast the future, try as we may. But this matters little. For it is **not** the future that holds us. It is **God** who holds us, and it is God who calls us; calls us to be God's image bearers on earth.

It is to this work that we are called as we come together as The Diocese of West Tennessee in Convention, called as God's image bearers so that the Gospel, the good news of God's promises in Christ, will be made known through the works of our lives.

This is our 30th Diocesan Convention. We are being invited anew to walk around the neighborhood where we have been placed by God. And like God who "stepped out on space, looked around and said, 'I'll make me a world'" we too are called to step out in faith and to act in faithfulness; To walk around the neighborhood and to breathe in the heady air of this new creation.

I close with one last story. The church growth consultant and author, Peter Steinke, tells of the time he was leading yet one more workshop on church revitalization. "A woman stood up" said Steinke, "and said, 'If 1950 were to return, my congregation would be ready'."

My friends, that day is not coming back. The living word - God's living word for the 21st Century - is a word for a new world. Into this new world we have been placed, plowed, sent and tilled, mixed and co-mingled. Showing care for creation among communities of care, we are a people sent into God's neighborhood. Now, it is time for us to take up our part in the wondrous act of co-creation to which we have been called so that God might smile once again and say, "*That's good!*"