

Sermon for 109th Annual Council, Duluth, Ga.
The Episcopal Church in Middle and North Georgia
Bishop Robert C. Wright
November 13, 2015
Luke 17: 26-36

Good Morning! *Buenos Dias!*

Greetings to you in the name of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. *Saludos a usted en el nombre de nuestro Señor Jesucristo.*

We are the Episcopal Diocese of Atlanta! The Episcopal Church in Middle and North Georgia. The baptized. Born in this church or welcomed home to it. Men and women. The young and the young at heart. Each of us attempting to love the Lord our God with our whole heart, mind, soul and strength, while loving our neighbor as ourselves.

This is the 109th time our faith family has gathered together like this. And over the next day and a half, we will worship and sing; we will fellowship and take counsel with one another; we will reflect on our achievements and we will acknowledge our challenges.

In other words, we are here to do the work that authors, guides and supports our common witness as followers of Jesus.

The theme for this year's Annual Council is: *Our Purpose, Our Stories. Nuestro propósito, nuestras historias.*

For just about two years, our convocational deans and I have been asking a simple but important question: *What is the purpose of the Episcopal Diocese of Atlanta? And, by logical extension, What is the purpose of your parish or ministry context? Who is God calling us to be now? What preferred future are we praying and laboring to make real?*

We will see, as Council continues, that many of you have taken this question of purpose very seriously. You have attempted to get to the notion of purpose through the telling of individual and communal faith stories. We've even got it on video: Episcopalians with great eloquence asking and answering questions like: *Why Jesus? Why the Episcopal Church? And, Why now?* It's almost like you promise regularly to "...proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ."

But this is a sermon, so let's get to the text. By some cosmic alignment, the Gospel lesson this morning helps us to think about our purpose and our story as individuals and

as a group. Luke's purpose is to tell the Jesus story. All of it. Not just the easy parts. Both the consolation and the part that requires courage.

You remember Luke, right? St. Paul's beloved primary care physician. The scientist believer. The religious outsider who takes us inside the mind of God. His purpose today is to help us to see the love of God in a passage that doesn't sound the way most of us prefer love to sound. In this 17th chapter of Luke there are no soft words, no

fleecy, rescued lambs or repentant children finding their way home. In the 17th chapter of Luke, Jesus doesn't calm the storm, he points to it. God is the storm! In the 17th chapter you get: "As it was with Noah it will be with you." There will be a flood. There will be loss. But not *all* will be lost. The flood will give birth to your future.

Jesus keeps going. *Hey, you remember the story about Lot?* Abraham prayed but the fire still came down. As a result, Lot and his congregation had to say goodbye. Relocate and reorganize. But they kept faith in the fire and the fire refined their future. You can almost hear the disciples say, "OK Jesus, where are we going with this?"

Jesus goes on. He connects the dots. As in Noah's day. As in Lot's day, so it is whenever God shows God's self. Interruption happens. Right in the middle of marrying and burying, buying and selling, and—I would add—worshiping and serving, God plops down and says, "See me, know me."

Of course, Jesus would speak to us of the whole mind and heart of God. That is his purpose. That is his story. His flesh and blood are for this. He's known this about himself since he was twelve. Jesus comes to remind us today that God is an interrupting God. That God is not an impeccably manicured English garden. But that God is a defiant dandelion in the middle of that English garden. Maybe even an annoying groundhog *under* the garden. That God is actively overthrowing anything that positions itself against the *on-growing* movement of God. Anything. Even the church.

This would make sense to Luke the doctor, I think. The stock and trade of his profession is incision that leads to healing. Infection can lead to immunity. And human growth and development are indebted to cells that are living, thriving and then being replaced for life's sake.

Though this truth may be difficult for us to understand and even more difficult for us to submit to as an organization and as individuals, it should nevertheless accrue to us as the substance of our joy. God is not dormant. God is not asleep. God has not forsaken us. God is in motion. Just like the Milky Way, God is in constant motion—using light and darkness, emptiness and abundance, chaos and order—all to accomplish God's

righteous purpose. In the fire and in the flood, there is an opportunity for each of us to depend on God exceedingly. Think of it this way: God wouldn't be worth our prayers and praise if God couldn't use the flood and the fire to make life abundant!

Now, with all of that said, I know what you're thinking. You're thinking, even if all of that is true, Jesus could have been more pastoral in his homily. Come on! "*Where the corpse is, there the vultures will gather?*" Come on, Jesus!

You're thinking that either Jesus or Luke, or both, could have benefitted from some time spent with that biblical luminary and psalmist Mary Poppins. Do you remember her words? "In every job that must be done there is an element of fun. Find the fun and the job's a game...Just a spoonful of sugar makes the medicine go down....in the most delightful way."

Maybe today's message could benefit from some sugar to make the medicine go down smooth, unless Jesus is using some superior sweetener. What is the substance of Jesus' pastoral care for us in the throws of fire and flood? Let me suggest to you that Jesus' pastoral care for his people is centered in his application of the paschal mystery.

That's paschal, like the candle: close, brilliant and towering over death. Paschal, as in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Paschal, like the words you and I have committed to memory: "*Christ has died. Christ has risen. Christ will come again.*"

I was talking about this with Bishop Frank Griswold some months ago. And he remarked that we—the people of God who recite the paschal mystery each week—too often fail to claim its power in our real life with Jesus. We do this by denying our fears and avoiding even the mention of loss and death. I think he's onto something. We do this as individuals and we do it collectively, to the peril of our souls. We forget that obsession with our soul's security is the surest way to lose our soul.

So hell-bent are we to present the always-flawless face, or the perfectly manicured life, that we never give resurrection a shot. By this approach, we show our addiction to the artificial sweeteners of life. But if the 17th chapter of Luke says anything, it says Jesus refuses to play that game. With Jesus, there is pain and betrayal, nails, thorns and asphyxiation. But, by the grace of God, with Jesus there is also relief, healing, reconciliation, realignment and resurrection. To be baptized into Jesus' death and resurrection is to join God in God's self-giving for the sake of the world. This is our purpose! *Esta es nuestra historia!*

What if we apply Jesus' paschal care to us here in the Episcopal Diocese of Atlanta?
What then? What would that mean for you personally, and for your congregation?

For us as a whole, we'd have to face that some of our congregations are declining. Indeed, some are in the ICU ward. Some might not make it. We'll have to face that some of our congregations will need to cease to gather in old ways and at familiar addresses. We'll have to face increasingly that clergy, some by choice, others by necessity, will more frequently be bivocational. Just like Paul was. For some, this news is too much to bear. I understand that. But if we choose Jesus' paschal care for us, we find that in all we bear, it is he who is bearing us up. We find that his wounds can heal us.

But not only that. We find that the loss of aspects of our former selves can focus us on our present purpose with clarity and urgency. Jesus told his friends, *"If you're on a rooftop, don't waste time rescuing your possessions. And if you're in a field tending to the harvest, stay focused. Not everybody will finish the journey the same way. People come and people go. But God is constant. Stay focused. Keep moving."*

And we did that last year as a diocese. Amidst loss, we saw gain. Last year, this diocese convened for worship 13,300 times all over Middle and North Georgia. We baptized 848 men, women and children. Hundreds of people claimed a mature and public relationship with Jesus Christ through Confirmation. And hundreds more people were welcomed home to the Episcopal Church through the grace of Reception. Still others stood up in front of the members of their church and said that God is doing something in their hearts. And they had to say it out loud. That's called Reaffirmation. All of this happened while more of us are drawing the circle wider: the circle of our faith and the circle of our commitment to our neighbors.

So yes, life and death are siblings. Side by side. But Jesus is Lord of them both. God can be known through them both. Somehow what Paul had to say at Corinth still speaks to us now: that none of the present afflictions we're encountering as the beloved of God are worthy to be compared to the glory that is being revealed by our faithfulness. That said another way: "Come ye disconsolate, where ever ye languish. Come to the mercy seat, fervently kneel. Here bring your wounded heart. Here tell your anguish. Earth has no sorrow that heaven cannot heal."

Our friend Barbara Brown Taylor tells a story about a huge sea turtle she ran across once on the Georgia coast. Having laid her eggs on the beach at night, the turtle became disoriented because of all the electric lights. Instead of heading back out to sea, her disorientation had taken her further inland and into the dunes.

She had strayed away from the very thing that she was made for. By the time morning came, the turtle was lost in the dunes, exhausted and baking in the morning sun. Barbara and her husband ran and found a park ranger and he brought his jeep with him.

Under the park ranger's guidance, they flipped the sea turtle upside down on her massive shell and strapped tire chains around her front legs, and then hooked the chains to a trailer hitch on the jeep. Behind the jeep, the turtle was carried over the dunes and back to the ocean's edge. The ranger unhooked her and turned her right side up. Then in the waves, she was home again. She was saved.

And Barbara says this: "It's sometimes hard to tell whether you are being killed or saved by the hands that turn your life upside down."

It's true that a life with God can feel like a fire and a flood. And it's true that sometimes we feel like God asks too much. But be encouraged brothers and sisters. If God is turning us upside down, it is only so God can bring us around right. To be faithful to that God is our purpose. And we are privileged to tell that story... Let it be so! To God be the glory!

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