

Diocese of Atlanta Renewal of Vows

April 15, 2014

The City of Refuge

John 12:20-36

The Rt. Rev. Rob Wright

Good morning!

Today we renew the promises we made to God at our baptism, our confirmation and our ordination. And it strikes me that any renewal with God is one part reminder, one part repentance, and one part rejoicing.

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Why did the Greeks request to see Jesus? The Bible doesn't say why. Your guess is as good as mine. Maybe those Greeks heard that Jesus was a powerful reminder of God. It's a curious thing to always need to be reminded about God and God's goodness.

Why are we so forgetful? How is it that God — the One who gave all life its evolutionary spark, the ruler of all things, the One who gives the universe symmetry, the only One that is good — can still so easily slip from our conscious mind and our primary concerns? Whatever the reason, being reminded of God and God's ways is to be renewed.

And so we remind ourselves today: God is real, able, good and generous. That God is a calling and sending God. That God is persistent, extravagant and dynamic. That God is a God of clear purposes, a God of partnership and the rewarder of faithfulness. An instrument making and polishing God. A God who delights in defying the counterfeit powers of the world, who has no tolerance for falsehood. That God is a refuge, deliverer and safe place. The hope of children and seniors alike. A praiseworthy God even after long nights of patient waiting. And so that we might see God more clearly, Jesus came to us. To tell us what is the height, depth, width and breadth of God's love. And in his short 33 years He showed us that being crushed or being perplexed, filled with despair or being forsaken, that none of them are ultimate. That our present hardships are not worthy to be compared with the light that God wants to shine through us. What Jesus did best was to show us that life is only Life after it comes through death. We remind ourselves today that we are beloved of this God. That baptism is a gift and all ministry, lay or ordained, is a privilege.

We remember that all ministry, lay or ordained, is to increase the celebrity of God in Jesus Christ and for the up-building of all people, Episcopalians and others alike. We remember that all of us are the object of God's persistent and extraordinary longing action. That we are the clay jars into which God has put precious treasure. That our weaknesses are the weaknesses that God is using to make power perfect. We are those whom God has come alongside in partnership for the reconciliation of the world. We are the divine instruments always in need of polish. We are the ones that the world still derides and jeers, and yet we are the ones gifted with an otherworldly confidence. Ours is cosmic assurance for earthly endurance.

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But real renewal is born of repentance. Unless wheat falls into the earth and dies it remains just a single grain. But if it dies, it bears much fruit. This is the indisputable, unassailable formula for church growth. If Jesus' spirit and mission is to grow among us, some dying is necessary: bishops, priests, deacons and laypeople — all of us! There's no renewal unless there is real repentance. So I ask you, how do you frustrate God's grace? How are you domesticating Christ's wild vision for His church? There's no condemnation here. But conviction to amendment of life is a gift from the Holy Spirit.

If the Episcopal Church, the Diocese of Atlanta and the place where you serve are to become fully what Christ intends, we will have to acknowledge and repent of our contribution to present circumstances. In other words, if the church has problems they are not disembodied problems. The problems are us! To experience the grace of renewal through repentance we will have to reflect deeply, beyond what is comfortable or familiar. We'll have to call an executive session with our soul to discover and name our infidelities to Christ. Infidelities like hiding in church and behind altars for fear of engagement with the world. Like refusal to go to the people we are sent to, like Jonah, because they are different from us. Like using the word "busy" when the word disobedient is more accurate. Like confusing arrogance with gospel boldness. Like allowing our insecurity and anxiety to rule us and those we serve. Like choosing careerism rather than vocation. Like overdependence on formal authority as a strategy to avoid the risks of discipleship. These are the kinds of things that make the church more mausoleum than monument to a risen Lord! What's your part?

And yet we do not lose heart. Even in the face of our sins, we do not lose heart. We are comforted with these words: All of us fall short of the glory of God. While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. Each of our failings is a precondition for our fruitfulness and the fruitfulness of the ministry that longs for birth in us. Implicit in repentance is our capacity for new life. "Lay aside the weight and the sin that clings so closely, and run with endurance the race that is set for us....looking to Jesus" is the call from Hebrews. "Clothe your ministers with righteousness, then let your people sing with joy," the psalmist cries out to us every morning. There's no condemnation in Christ Jesus, but there is transformation in the renewing of our minds. Repentance leads to adaptation and is the only real way forward. We may be the problems, but by the grace of repentance we are the solutions.

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We need a story here: A long time ago, in the golden age of Hollywood, a reporter saw Miss Mae West on a red carpet wrapped in an exquisite sequined gown. Her hands, her wrists, her ears and neck were absolutely dripping in precious gems. Overcome by this sight, the reporter said, "Oh my, Miss West. Your diamonds, your emeralds, your rubies, my goodness!" To which Miss West said famously, "Honey, goodness had nothing to do with it!" It's true for us. Goodness had nothing to do with it. All we have is gift. And so we rejoice.

Israel was pitiful among the nations but it seemed good for God to choose her. Paul was a small-town hick, a second-class intellect and not very easy on the eyes either, but God chose him to pen God's goodness in Christ. The disciples were bumblers, at best intermittently effective; just look at how difficult it was for them to make a simple introduction at a party, and yet without them our faith would be poorer. Goodness has nothing to do with it. Remembering is fleeting. And repentance, at best, is slow and scared. But joy comes from having been honored by a God who for love's sake honors the lowly. Joy comes from knowing Life is alive in us.

So we rejoice our way into renewal. We go slow over our photo album and wonder: why is God mindful of us? And who are we that the Lord should visit us? And the only conclusion that is most true is God must be good. Then we rejoice. Then our soul is renewed by gratitude. Then we brighten up. Then our hearts unfold. Then we facilitate renewal wherever God has planted us.

But not only that, we rejoice because we serve a God worth waiting for. They wished to see Jesus. Their festival was incomplete without Him. That sounds like longing to me. Sounds like they know what it means to wait on meeting the Lord. There is something of that in the Psalm today: "I shall wait in patience and I will praise you all the more." There is a connection between waiting and joy. We wish it were not so, but it is. We would be wise to remember scripture, "Let patience have her perfect work." Waiting beyond your ability to wait and then waiting some more; we have waited, more than the watchman in the morning. Panting like a deer for water. After that then comes the beloved. Then comes the stream. Just like spring flowers. Then comes the answer. Then comes the healing. Then comes the opportunity. Then comes the blessing. This is how God renews the soul: silence then sound, music and rests together. This is the sermon for every Sunday. This is who the church is, people waiting and finding God mighty to save and rejoicing. Renewal is what happens to us after Good Friday and the silence of Saturday have done their worst. Rejoicing is renewal's soundtrack. Rejoicing sings, "Earth has no sorrow that heaven cannot heal." The treasure that is in us is not of us, but it is for us and for the world. "For this cause we do not faint, but though our outward person is perishing, yet our inward person is being renewed day by day."

Thanks be to God. So bless the Lord my soul, and bless God's Holy Name. Bless the Lord my soul, who leads me into life. AMEN