



ELCIC National Bishop Susan C. Johnson's Sermon

Opening Worship Service for National Church Council's Spring Meeting
March 5-8, 2008

Is 43:16-21
Rev 21:1-5a
Luke 1:26-38

I want to begin today by asking you a question, namely, what is your reaction to new things? Are you someone who hates change at any cost? Or are you someone who will always opt for the previously untried experience? Or are you like me and you kind of waffle between the two depending on the situation? Even when I was young I waffled between loving the new and unknown and hating the new and unknown. Like, when it came to birthdays or Christmas, bring on the new thing – presents – new and unknown (except for the year we found the watches we receiving in mom and dad's clothes hamper – ok – I confess – we were snooping). Anyhow, presents were exciting things, vacations were exciting things.

And at the same time there were new and unknown things – like moving to a new school, moving to a new town, that absolutely filled me with dread and terror. Probably the thing that made me react differently to the different new things were my expectations of how they were going to turn out. Presents and vacations for the most part were good. I may not have received exactly what I wanted, but it was still always something good. But I was an expert at figuring out worst case scenarios for some of those other new things – like moving to a new school – people wouldn't like me, I wouldn't do well, I'd get lost – you know. Come to think of it that's kind of how it's been over the past few months!!

The lessons for today's worship are both wonderful and terrifying. In all of them we hear the message that God is active and doing a new thing. From Isaiah - I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? From Revelation - See, I am making all things new. And in the annunciation from Luke's gospel the message that God is doing a new thing not just with Mary, but a new way of relating to God's people – in the flesh.

The reality is that God is still doing a new thing and we are caught right smack dab in the middle of it. We are in a time of major transition in our church and frankly, it's not just our church that is going through major transition!

- We are transitioning into being a church in mission for others. This means letting go of some traditional ways of being and doing things and refocusing our energy and resources on following Jesus in the world and serving our neighbour.
- We are transitioning as congregations, synods, national church and Lutheran World Federation in terms of our size and our resource base. This puts a lot of strain at every level of our church. Sometimes it means that our basic human instinct for survival is in direct competition with our desire to be a church in mission for others.
- We are transitioning in terms of our understanding of ordained ministry. Many congregations are struggling with whether they can afford full-time ordained ministry.

What might this mean for the role of ordained ministry in the future? Worker-priest? Circuit rider? What changes would this necessitate to our recruitment and training of rostered ministers? Obviously this also has huge implications for congregational life.

- We are in transition in our understanding of what it means to be and stay in the church together. Our homogeneity is being pushed. How much difference in piety and polity can we bear and still remain as part of one church? We want to keep the main thing the main thing, but don't agree on what is the main thing. We made it through last summer's convention, but what will be the next test to our commitment to stay together as church??

So how do we deal with all this transition and the anxiety that it produces within us? Well, remember what I said earlier about how the way I viewed or dealt with new things had to do with my expectations? Well here my friends, we need to remember that our expectations for the transition that our church is in the midst of has to be based on our relationship and experience with God. This is not just us, a bunch of bonehead Lutherans fumbling around trying to figure things out. This is God's church, and God's new thing and we are privileged to go along for the ride. It's out of our control. It may not end up looking like anything we recognize or could even have imagined. But we need to trust a little more that if it is God's it is going to be good. And we need to take our cue from the angel – do not be afraid!!

Let me share a poem with you that my father gave to me about twenty years ago. It has often helped me gain perspective in the midst of my own transitional anxiety. It's called "Pedal".

Pedal

At first I sat in front, Jesus in the rear
I couldn't see him, but I knew he was there
I could feel his help when the road got steep

Then one day Jesus changes seats with me
Suddenly everything went topsy turvy
When I was in control the ride was predictable, even boring
But when Jesus took over it got wild

I could hardly hold on
"This is madness!" I cried out
But Jesus just smiled and said pedal
And so I learned to shut up and pedal and trust my bike companion

Oh, there are still times when I get scared and I'm ready to give up
But then Jesus turns around, touches my hand, smiles, and says "Pedal."

My dear friends, I am so excited about our time together these next few days. I am looking forward to working together to try to discern what new thing God is calling us to. I hope and pray that we can have the courage to let God lead and the strength and wisdom to follow. Amen.