You Are the Light of the World
Address to the 51ST Annual Convention of the
Diocese of Southwest Florida
Oct. 12, 2019
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In modern times, as the Diocese of Southwest Florida gathers in its annual convention, we, and many other dioceses, assemble around some theme provided in the form of a slogan, phrase of Holy Scripture, or logo to assist us in focusing our mission, our budget purpose, or our corporate worship. Our assembling themes in recent years have included: Work, Pray, and Give; or We Have this Treasure; Come, Holy Spirit Come; or Christ is Made the Sure Foundation. One was even called, the 40th Annual Convention.

This year, for our 51st Annual Convention, our assembling theme is Christ’s Missionary statement to the disciples in the Sermon on the Mount “You are the Light of the World.” This Scriptural Missionary statement is larger than a Jesus of Nazareth historical reference, as is it is clearly an initiating statement to the Church. The scriptural words “You are the Light of the World” also resonate with a number of voices in the Bible that help us understand God, His Son, and ourselves. Seen on the cover of this year’s convention booklet, and deepening the words for our convention theme, is the image of a lightly outlined Jesus present in
our world revealing himself over a typical photographic image of a beach scene in Southwest Florida. Even when we go to the beach Jesus Christ is present with us!

Please know this is simply an attempt from my office to design a theme that is functional. We started by trying to use the very famous allegorical painting from 1851 titled “The Light of the World.” It didn’t modernize very well for a convention pin or logo, yet it still makes a very important statement. Painted by William Hunt it illustrates Revelation 3:20 “Behold I stand at the door and knock” and represents Jesus knocking on an overgrown and long unopened door which has no handle and can only be opened from the inside. It is called a “sermon in a frame” as it reveals the imperative that the savior of the world is alive and will dwell with those who admit him.

A century ago it was the most popular and traveled picture in the British empire. It created a powerful spiritual image of Jesus trying to overcome chaos and open the heart of the world. It is useful for the Church to reflect on Christ attempting to overcome chaos and open our hearts to him as expressed in this painting. It doesn’t take much for us to remember that we, the Church, are placed in the world to be Christ’s Light and bring loving order into a world that is, according to the theology of John’s Gospel, at enmity with the heart of God’s desire.
In one sense, Jesus’ claim for the Church, “You are the Light of the World” in the Gospel according to Matthew is both a Mission of the Church claim and the beginning voice of identity for who Jesus is, and sent to be, when he further states, “I am the Light of the World” as discovered in the Gospel of John.

We have been at the Jesus mission for multiple generations and now carry out the purposeful continuation of God’s creation -- the Church. Now in this Convention of the Church, I suspect that you will be pleased to know that I announce nothing new in terms of initiatives, programs, or diocesan staff hires at this 51st Annual convention. Yet we live continuously forward into the voice of Christ who claims, “Behold, I make all things new.”

Without, therefore, announcing any new initiatives or programs I would like to comment on the purposeful and maturing continuation of Christ Light shedding ministries, or, in other words, the ongoing stability of a healthy diocese. In our convention booklet I did write about the required responsibility of vestries, Diocesan Convention delegates and clergy to fully participate in the governance of the Church. This, of course, is our polity and not an interesting option. Electing Standing Committee members and Diocesan Council members, by way of example, has ultimately to do with the health of congregations, the ordinations of clergy leaders, and the adoption of budgets that have Gospel meaning and imperative. We assemble with these and other purposes in mind today.
I remember the first time I attended a congregational annual meeting. It was after I had been approved to go to seminary from the Diocese of Central Florida and locally endorsed by the vestry of St. James in Ormond Beach. It is notable to realize that I had fully grown up in the Episcopal Church as a preacher’s kid and, of course, had never been to an Annual Meeting (or a Diocesan Convention for that matter.) I was introduced to the congregation by the new rector (they all knew me) and asked if I wanted to say anything. For the first time in my life I was completely tongue-tied with nothing to say. Please know I had spent years playing in various bands being the lead singer and front man…and I couldn’t speak a word. I needed the Church to perform full leadership development on me so I could learn how to understand polity, how to listen…and then how to speak up. I haven’t shut up since! My point is that our work here makes that kind of development of people possible.

An additional illustration is that the Diocesan budget, prepared and annually guided by Diocesan Council and managed by my staff and me, forms people into mature adulthood in collegiate ministry under the spiritual guidance of college chaplains. The chaplains workshop yesterday noted that they are on the front lines of ministry serving the young people who are seeking a spiritual home, even if they can’t name it as such. Our work together today makes available the formation and
development of congregational leadership like vestries and clergy in retreats and conferences at DaySpring. Our Light revealing work today makes available assistance to congregations who are fragile and need a boost towards health. Our work together today provides financial assistance for targeted growth initiatives on the congregational level. Targeted growth has to do with evangelism and mission. As I said, we’ve been at the continuation of the Jesus ministry for multiple generations and yet we still have much ministry to offer to strengthen our congregations and help transform the world.

In our first bishop’s second address on October 28, 1970, Bishop Hargrave said, “Three new missions have been established. In Naples, in the Park Shore section, St. John’s Church under the leadership of the Rev. Tom Moss is now an Organized Mission and a member of the Convention. Within six months, it has a communicant list exceeding seventy persons. This is a part of the outreach of Trinity-by-the-Cove in Naples.” Bishop Hargrave continued, “The same congregation, Trinity, started services only last Sunday in Bonita Springs, a growing community half-way between Naples and Ft. Myers.

To the north, on October 1st, services were begun in the Spring Hill area, near Weeki Wachee Springs, under the charge of the Rev. Richard Morris, Vicar of Brooksville.”
Bishop Smith, the fifth bishop now states, we also, importantly, have two Church plants in stages of development in our diocese this October of 2019. One is in Wesley Chapel and we welcome them as an Associated Worshipping Community at this convention. They are under the leadership of the Rev. Adrienne Hymes. The second Church plant has just started meeting one month ago at DaySpring in Parrish under the leadership of the Rev. Carol Fleming. Fifty years ago, one parish and one mission congregation assisted the emergence of three new church plants. In 2019, all of our congregations that create and support the diocesan budget create the emergence of our new church plants. We observe different ecclesial styles and congregation definitions over the past fifty years, and yet, we are still creating congregations where we are the needed light of Christ in the world.

The life of the Diocese of Southwest Florida is experiencing a large number of clergy transitions over the 50th year of our life together. This reality largely has to do with a greater number of retirements in our Church. Although this creates a goodly number of new opportunities in our congregations it also points to this realization. In the 13th year of my consecration as your bishop I have trusting friendships with these senior priests and deacons who are retiring. I feel loss at their departures. I am grateful for them in my life and so pleased that God brought us together in this time and place.
Besides the great clergy in our diocese I am also extremely proud of my staff at Diocesan House. They help me perform the office of oversight as bishop in profound and clear ways. Furthermore, we predominately have strong vestries giving thoughtful leadership and generous amounts of time in our congregations offering clear, insightful direction to help our congregations grow in faith and mission. I thank all of you.

One brief word about DaySpring. Just five or six years ago, the Diocesan Council made the courageous decision to shift the operational design of DaySpring from being a place that was simply available to make reservations to a sacred place that created and offered enriching programs for the informing and forming of our clergy, vestries, youth and outside communities. It has evolved into a dynamic and life-giving change. Said another way, much of what we do here in this diocese, in our congregations, in our clergy gatherings, in our calling of people to ordination, in our programs at DaySpring reveal God’s light in an often-darkened world. One of my early bishops started his ordained service as a curate at St. Wilfred’s in Sarasota and as college chaplain at Manatee Community College. Later, the 6th bishop of Northern Indiana, Bishop Frank Gray, used to instruct me with this aphorism about the Church: “People go to where there is light.” I believe that means that people go to where there is the opportunity for meaning, hope, clarity, truth, life, coherence and purpose…in other words, holiness.
In political commentator and author David Brook’s newest book, *The Second Mountain – The Quest for a Moral Life*, he relays a story of a husband and wife who share meals and relationships with discarded children, teens and young adults. These hurt people gather at the home of Kathy and David for dinner and cell phones are banned. Brooks writes, “The adults come from the emotionally avoidant world of Washington D.C. and get to shed their armor. The kids come from the streets and call Kathy and David Mom and Dad, their chosen parents.” Brooks further notes, “the dinner table is the key technology of social intimacy here. It is the tool we use to bond, connect, and commit to one another. I’ve learned to never underestimate the power of a dinner table. It’s the stage on which we turn to one another for love like flowers seeking the sun….one night one young woman said to Kathy, ‘Thank you for seeing the light in me.’”

When Jesus said, “I am the Light of the World,” he was claiming a central Biblical image as an expression of his character and identity. As the psalmist informed us who God is with: “The Lord is my Light (Psalm 27:1)” we gain the same insight for Christ Jesus. The Baptismal Covenant asks, “Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself.” Recognizing the light of God in another, particularly a wounded person, a searching person, a
person desiring love, is a clear spiritual resonance with God’s Son who can say to us “You are the Light of the World.”

There is a goodness and a generosity in the hearts of so many spiritual leaders, both clergy and lay people, in the Diocese of Southwest Florida. I am humbled to serve as bishop here. I do believe that our Lord looks into our loving souls and declares, “You are the Light of the World” and then expects us to step out and help transform the world from chaos to order; from brokenness to wholeness; from fear to faith; from deception to truth; and from darkness to light. After Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans I heard broken, wounded people say “Thank God for the Church” because of the churches immediate compassion and mercy. We are that Church. You are the Light of the World. Walk as a child of the light. Thank you for your faithfulness and love. The world right here in Southwest Florida needs you. You don’t need to go anywhere to be a light of the world missionary. Just say your prayers and be the light. The world needs you. Say your prayers and be the light.

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