

Bishop James S. Dunlop Remarks
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St. James Lutheran Church, Gettysburg

These are the statutes and ordinances that you must diligently observe in the land that the LORD, the God of your ancestors, has given you to occupy all the days that you live on the earth. (Deut. 12:1 NRSV)

But you shall seek the place that the LORD your God will choose out of all your tribes as his habitation to put his name there. You shall go there, (Deut. 12:5 NRSV)

Chapter 12 of Deuteronomy is a major shift in the Old Testament. God met the people of Israel in cloud and fire and eventually in the tabernacle where the Ark of the Covenant resided. They wandered in the wilderness for 40 years when Moses stood and spoke these words to the people of God. It will be another 500 years before Solomon will actually build the Temple in Jerusalem. But in this moment Moses says that God has decided to place his name in one place. That place becomes the Temple in Jerusalem. It becomes the center of the Jewish faith. Keep in mind the name of God was the power of God. It is why the name of God is never to be spoken in Hebrew, God's name is the very power of God. It is why Jacob, wrestling with God at the Jabbok, asks "What is your name?" and God does not answer but rather gives Jacob a new name, Israel. Why all this Old Testament history? Because it is the establishment of the house of worship, God has placed God's name in a place.

It is important to understand where this passage, Renewing God's House to Share God's Love, your campaign theme, comes from in the Bible. The temple in Jerusalem, in times after King Solomon, has fallen into disrepair, and even at times, worshipping other gods was conducted in the temple. There was a time when Athaliah attempted to kill everyone in the royal family. But one of the king's young sons, a baby, was hidden away and his name was Joash. When he was seven, Joash was anointed by the priests and restored to the throne. His story is in 2 Kings chapter 12 and 2 Chronicles chapter 24. When he grew up, he recognized that the Lord's house was in disrepair. He told the priests to repair it, but they did nothing. So, he had a box placed in the temple and asked people to give to restore the temple. When the box was filled, they would hire workers to work on the restoration. It was a building project conducted in phases.

Whenever they saw that there was a large amount of money in the chest, the Levites would bring the chest to the king's officers. The king's secretary and the officer of the chief priest would empty the chest and return it to its place. So, they did day after day and collected money in abundance.

¹² The king and Jehoiada gave it to those who had charge of the work of the house of the LORD, and they hired masons and carpenters to restore the house of the LORD, and also workers in iron and bronze to repair the house of the LORD.

¹³ So those who were engaged in the work labored, and the repairing went forward at their hands, and they restored the house of God to its proper condition and strengthened it.

(2 Chr. 24:11-13 NRSV)

Today where does God's name dwell for us? In the presence of God's only Son our Lord, in the person of Jesus Christ. Present in word and sacrament, present in God's Spirit among us, present in a splash of water on our heads, present where two or three are gathered, present here in this place.

As bishop I am often asked what does the future of the church look like? What is God up to in the church? Why are so many congregations struggling? And the reality is that there are congregations struggling in the changing landscape around us.

Often as bishop, after years of decline I am called to congregations in their last gasp, the last few faithful people unwilling to change, unwilling to respond to God's Spirit, God's dream for the church.

I also visit many congregations that are surviving, swimming against a tide of change trying to make ends meet, holding on, doing okay, but decreasing their mission outreach making ends meet. Turning in on themselves hoping for better times or maybe just a return to times that are never coming back.

Sometimes people ask how it is that I am hopeful. I am hopeful because we are a resurrection people who believe in a God who has never given up on God's people. The truth is that the church has been through much more challenging times than this, but the church goes on. God's Spirit still moves through the church. People empowered by the Holy Spirit are responding to God building on the dream of God.

For as many congregations that I spend time with that are struggling, I see congregations that enliven by the Holy Spirit are reaching out in new and creative ways. Congregations that are looking out in their neighborhoods and finding new ways to respond to the leading of the Spirit. Thriving and growing congregations, bright spots in our synod. That is why I was excited to be with you tonight. You are one of those congregations that is leading in this ministry we share.

The Old Testament story of King Joash is instructive in that he wanted to restore the worship place, the dwelling of God. Now, you are looking at how you might bring restoration and renewal to your facility. You have the advantage that your priests are not standing in your way,

as Joash's priests did. And I commend you that you are not waiting for things to be falling down around your ears. You are making sure that this house of God is what it needs to be for the next generation. You know this is personal for me since my grandchildren are here and are that next generation.

This building is a gift to the community. To the groups that gather here from inside and outside your community of faith. To the young children in your daycare program. This building is a worship center but it also a community center. It is part of the ministry to which you are called in this place.

One of things that makes me hopeful as I travel throughout our synod is vital thriving congregations. The definition that we use to describe thriving congregations is: communities of Jesus that nurture people into life-changing relationships with God, one another and the world. These congregations have passionate worship, intentional faith formation, radical hospitality, and risk-taking mission. AND one of the characteristics that I see in thriving congregations is extravagant generosity. To give freely in response to what God is doing. Throughout our synod the congregations that are growing and changing are the ones that recognize the blessing that God has bestowed and are responding in faith. Jesus said that "where your treasure is there your heart will be also." Notice he did not say where your heart is your treasure will follow. He said, "where your treasure is there your heart will be also." If you want to change your heart, if you want to love your church, if you want to respond to God's call, place your treasure there. Your heart will follow. Giving is a spiritual gift. Thriving congregations are ones who know that giving is a spiritual discipline just as prayer, meditation, worship and service. These things change our hearts. I am grateful for your ministry and witness in our synod.

When I talk about the future of the church there is one key that changes the dynamic of the church. That is leadership. Too often in the church we think immediately of the rostered ministers and staff of the church. And don't get me wrong, you have some of the finest church leaders on your staff, but it goes much deeper. It is you, the people in this room who are the leaders in this congregation and the leaders in our synod. Your commitment to responding to God's Spirit moving within you is a model of faith for your congregation and the larger church. Your commitment to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ into a hurting world so desperate to hear the Good News is an example of what the church can be in this day and age. God's Spirit is moving in this congregation in this time. You have the opportunity to lead, to be engaged in strengthening this gift to your community. To the community of faith in this place and to the community that surrounds this building. You can lead the restoration of the house of God to its proper condition and strengthen it.

So, I end with the apostle Paul. "Now as you excel in everything – in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in utmost eagerness, and in our love for you – so we want you to excel also in this

generous undertaking. I do not say this as a command, but I am testing the genuineness of your love against the earnestness of others. For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich.”

Let us pray. Gracious God, we give thanks for the gift of your Spirit that moves within us and within the congregation of St. James Lutheran Church. May your Spirit empower us to respond in extravagant generosity so that your outreach to this community may be strengthened in this place. I give thanks for these leaders in our synod who are modeling faithful discipleship for the whole church in furthering your mission preaching, teaching, baptizing and making disciples in your name. Please continue to walk with them on this journey of faith and quest for growth of your church. We ask all things in the name of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.