



Sermon at the Installation of Mark S. Hanson as Presiding Bishop of the ELCA

Rev. Heidi Neumark

Delivered by Rev. Heidi Neumark, October 11, 2001 - just one month after the attack on the towers of the World Trade Center.

[Bishop Mark S. Hanson](#), newly elected presiding bishop of the [ELCA](#), asked Pastor Heidi Neumark, Transfiguration Lutheran Church, Bronx, New York, to be the preacher for his installation as bishop at a eucharistic celebration at Rockefeller Chapel, University of Chicago, in Hyde Park, Chicago on Saturday, October 6, 2001.

This is the sermon she preached. Pastor Neumark is a leader of South Bronx Churches (congregation-based organizing effort), a member of the board of directors of Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia, a writer, and pastor of Transfiguration Lutheran for the past 18+ years.

Beloved Church...

What shall I preach? All flesh is grass . "Teacher the birds are on fire." ...said a kindergarten child seeing people falling in the blue sky. Earthen vessels crushed...as rescue workers sift and lift with care the pieces that remain...

What shall I preach? All flesh is grass...the grass withers, the flower fades. (Is.40:6ff)

The photographs multiply like flowers around our city, smiling faces, bright eyes, identifying details springing up here and there and everywhere - He has a crescent shaped scar on his shoulder. She has a French manicure on her hands and feet.

The papers wither and fade like hope in the rain. *The Word of God will stand forever.*

But our own words...Beloved...our own words? We don't even have the alphabet.

I am grateful to whoever chose the texts for today. Isaiah, in particular, that ancient correspondent from ground zero in the 6th century B.C. has been a good companion over these past weeks.

The world-renowned city that seemed invincible - attacked and capsized by terror. Towers collapsed in rubble, bronze temple pillars broken into pieces - the glorious architectural feat and economic seat in the great city - crashed and burning.

Jerusalem 587 - New York 9 / 11

The sacred stones lie scattered at the head of every street, sighs Jeremiah in lamentation...the precious children worth their weight in gold - how they are reckoned as earthen pots...shattered. (Lam.4:1-2)

Jerusalem 587 - New York 9 / 11

Survivors in exile from all that was expected and secure...displaced people without foothold or language, wondering where is the Word that failed to stay this chaos - as tons of paper and all the words scatter and dissolve in ash.

We don't even have the alphabet.

Jerusalem 587 - New York 9 /11

A plume of bitter incense rises up from the rubble and falls again dusting everything in sight and out of sight, sticking in our throats and lungs, and souls. You hear power generators, metal cutters, trucks, cranes...but there is nothing there that one could call a song of joy breaking forth from those ruins...and yet...Isaiah tells us it will come. He too has searched through wreckage and lifted up dismembered pieces, letter by letter, phrase by phrase: *Break forth together into singing you ruins of Jerusalem...the Lord has comforted his people, the Lord has bared his holy arm.*

I've been visiting Felipe who worked at the World Trade Center keeping the vending machines stocked with candy and chips. His wife Elba joined the *via dolorosa* of thousands, walking from hospital to hospital around the city, showing her picture of a proud, immigrant from Honduras, a father with his arms around the two young children he adored. She held out the picture to anyone who would look, hoping against hope that she would find him alive. And then, miraculously, she did. Alive, but barely. Alive, but covered with burns from the fiery explosion. His children wanted to see their father but Elba shook her head and she was right. While most of his body was hidden beneath layers of dressing, the part of his face that showed was swollen and charred, disfigured beyond recognition.

He had only the blackened remains of one ear left, but the nurses told me they believed he could hear. As I lay in bed feeling sad and helpless, my husband Gregorio, also an adoring father to a son and daughter said, "Why don't you have his children record a tape for him - *eso le dará ánimo* - that will strengthen his soul." It gave me *ánimo* too - something to do when one is helpless. Ten year old Leonel knew immediately what he wanted to say: "I miss you Daddy. I wish this never had to happen. I want you to come home. I love you Daddy." But 5 year old Rosiana was mute. I was holding a strange machine that had nothing to do with her father who was in some strange place her mother disappeared to every morning in tears and came home from at night in anxious exhaustion. 5 year old Rosiana had nothing to say to the gray box. Why should she? But I was unreasonably desperate to capture her voice. "Do you like to sing?" I asked and a smile played across Rosiana's face as she nodded. I turned on the recorder and Rosiana sang to her father: "a,b,c,d,e,f,g..." I played it for a week, holding the machine close to Felipe's ear like a cell phone and saw no response. I also read psalms and prayed prayers and yet I was sure that if anything would get through the fog of morphine and pain, it would be the voices of his children. Towards the end of the second week, after grafts on his arms and chest and after much of the dead skin on his face and head - and ear had been removed - I played the tape again and I saw Felipe, eyes still shut, trying to speak. I watched two words take shape on lips so fragile they bled from the effort: "Thank... you." The words made no sound but filled the burn unit as a hymn of gratitude breaking forth from the ruins. Connection is everything. Relationship to God and to each other is life itself.

...That is why we are here together today. That is why we in the ELCA are so grateful to each of you who have come from other parts of the world and from other church bodies, to embody and affirm the connection we share as children of God and coheirs with Christ. Thanks be to God and thank you! Gracias! Danke!

Terima Kasih! Tatenda! Asante Sana!...

Permit me also to speak a word of profound gratitude on behalf of your sisters and brothers in New York. Your outpouring of love and prayer has held us up when the earth shook and the ground slipped away. The power of the communion of saints has transfused our bodies and souls with strength to go on. There is power, wonder-working power, in the blood we share!

Two weeks ago, Bishop Anderson came and visited us in New York along with President Kieschneck and President Benke of the Missouri Synod, Gil Furst and Elaine Bryant of Lutheran Disaster Relief, and all the other Regional Bishops. Their presence was the tangible expression of the larger Church standing with us at Ground Zero. I think

that's why Isaiah begins with the feet: *How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, good news, salvation..*

There's debate in some quarters about what we do with our hands, whose hands go on whose head - be that as it may, Isaiah directs our attention to the feet. Church, I think that people just might be watching the apostolic succession of our feet. Bishops...Mark, people will be watching your feet...where you walk, where you visit, where you lead and where you allow yourself to be led.

Today we celebrate as we stand together. Recent tragedy has brought us together as a nation and a church. Yes and no. Lucia, a six year old girl from our church was in McDonald 's with her mother last week when another woman gave the child dirty looks, got up and spit at her. The mother's anger flew out in her native Spanish. "Que está haciendo? Está loca?" "Oh..I didn't know you were Spanish. I thought she was one of those...Arab people." "Que importa, what importance has that?"..."Well, you know this is a war." Yes, we are more united and no we are not.

All over the city we see photos of the missing with names and stories. Day after day they are printed in our newspapers so that everyone can see the faces, learn the names and mourn the loss together as well we should, the loss not of statistics but of beloved individuals. In my neighborhood there are other memorials too. Day after day, I pass them - colorful graffiti memorials spray-painted on walls for teenagers slain on our streets in the prime of their life. In 18 years, I have yet to see a single one remembered and mourned in our city papers. The statistics of this violence are filed away, but not the loving details of these children whose Creator has counted every precious hair on their heads. Yes, we are more united and no we are not.

Literally within minutes of becoming aware of the terrorist attacks, people began clamoring to get to Ground Zero in New York City- to come in person and to send all kinds of resources, material and spiritual for rescue, comfort, support and the rebuilding of life. This stampede of generosity is still going on and it's wonderful. You, Church, have joined that marvelous stampede. And yet... Elie Wiesel, no stranger to the geography of terror and loss, has said that wherever human life is trampled, wherever injustice and the suffering of human beings goes on unchecked...there must be for us the center of the universe. In this case it is, but more often it is not.

The daily ravages of injustice are less eye-catching than the events of Sept. 11, but no less devastating in their human toll. Millions of dollars have been raised to ensure that every family facing financial hardship or displacement due to this terrorist attack can be helped, but what of the many more poor, starving, sick and homeless already? We are now moving in the right direction to stand with the 12 million plus children orphaned by AIDS in Africa and the millions more threatened with the terror of this virus, but we could hardly claim that our response has been a stampede of generosity. We must confess that we have dragged our feet.

People are watching our feet, Church. Before coming to Chicago, I spoke with a dear brother in Christ, Father John Grange, with whom I share community organizing work in the Bronx. He spent Tuesday night at Ground Zero performing a gruesome liturgy - blessing body parts - piece after piece, all night long. He told me that he hasn't slept well since. We are naturally horrified by dismembered bodies in the rubble, but the dismembering of our human family and even the very body of Christ by racism and class prejudice, by sexism, division between those who are documented and those who are not, those who are inside, behind bars and those who hold the keys, and sometimes just petty matters, this gruesome dismemberment has ceased to horrify us. Many of us sleep right on through it. We have conferences and workshops, commissions and studies. We are in the city for good and it's all good, but it's not good enough. Just consider the almost crazed persistence and passion of those rescue workers carrying on without the results they hope for, insisting that there is still life to be found, lives to be restored. In the case of the firemen, they see their lost brothers as family, family they simply cannot bear to abandon. What might that tell us?

Wouldn't it be something if candidates came out of our seminaries clamoring for bishops to send them to the twin centers of the universe - North Dakota and the South Bronx: "Bishop, please I have my family to consider. That's my family there bishop, down those dusty roads and fields, on those tractors and in those shelters and clinics and projects, behind those prison bars, I have my children to consider Bishop. I have the baptismal certificate to prove

it! Please send me there." Or pastors in their later years, seeking a better call : "Bishop, now that I have more experience, at least to know how little I know, please consider me, please I beg you send me to Ground Zero. I have family there." And in that vision the Board of Pensions would say: "We are one family. We have one rate, in every city, in every region. Together we'll shoulder the burden for we are one Church." And the Mission Investment Fund would jump like Jeremiah to invest in a field of rubble with prophetic passion and faith in the restoration God was sure to work...Well...Church, we are united and we are not.

Mark, Isaiah also lived among a divided people: *By the rivers of Babylon there we sat down and wept when we remembered Zion.* The exiles wept as so many have wept these past weeks. *If I forget you, O Jerusalem let my right hand wither.* (Ps.137) But time and distance tempered their grief and cut their sense of connection to those left behind in the inner city of Jerusalem. Interestingly for us, when the business leaders, artisans, soldiers and priests were carried off to exile, *the captain of the guard left some of the poorest people of the land to be vinedressers and tillers of the soil.*(2 Kings 25:12) - forsaken farmers left behind in the ruined city. So there, in what were considered the waste places of Jerusalem, you had a blend of North Dakota and the South Bronx all in one. A first call delight!

A second and third generation in exile forgot the words and rites of their true home. Like many people today, they became willing captives to the wealth of Babylon and the lure of its new age gods, but deep down they were as lost and disconnected as the forsaken ones back in the ruins. The rebuilding of Jerusalem was a dubious mission investment with no foreseeable return, no fringe benefits and a lousy pension to boot. They didn't see the connection to their own renewal and life. They forgot that connection is everything, that relationship to God and to each other is life itself. And so they turned away, shaking off the dust that clung to their feet and their hearts.

And that is when Isaiah raises his voice with a blast of rhetorical passion meant to rouse those exiles from business as usual to consider some other feet...some beautiful feet... feet heading straight for the waste places of Jerusalem where the arm of God is about to turn things around for everyone. "Follow those feet, folks!" shouts Isaiah. "Follow those feet!" *How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, good news and salvation. Who says, your God rules!*

Beautiful? The feet that walked upon those mountains must have been dusty, swollen, and sweaty. On the Sunday after the attack, some of our Sunday School children walked down the block to our local fire station which lost 3 men when the towers collapsed. They carried cards with prayers, bible verses and pictures they'd made. The children saw photographs of the fallen heroes over their lockers...and in one locker, a pair of boots caked in ash, boots recovered from the rubble. "Were those his real boots?" 6 year old Derrick asked. Yes they were. "Was he wearing them in there?" Yes he was. "Can I touch them?" The fireman hesitated. These boots and every particle of dust they bore were precious. You could tell he didn't want that dust dislodged. " Let's just look," I said, as another fireman appeared with a plate of homemade chocolate chip cookies for the children. The dust on those boots was not the dust Jesus counseled his followers to shake off. It was dust that had something holy about it, dust that bore a message of saving love, dust from Calvary. *How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger.* Beauty in those dirty boots because of where they went and why.

Isaiah directed his exiles gaze towards the mountains where the beautiful feet appeared, with a Word that reached toward the ruins, because the prophet knew that the waste places of disconnect between the exiles and those left behind was the very space where God would gather them together and make all things new - together. Some people believe that the ELCA is heading straight to hell. Mark, please lead the stampede! (there's a line to quote out of context!) Lead us to Ground Zero, take us to the waste places of disconnect from each other, from other nations, from our earth, from God - that we too may be made new all together.

Break forth together into singing you waste places of Jerusalem, for the Lord has comforted his people, the Lord has bared his holy arm before the eyes of all nations. The holy arm in plain sight! - the Word become flesh. There it was in a dusty manger. The holy arm. Not armaments. Arms. Bared. So small. So vulnerable. So weak. Do you ever feel small, Mark? Powerless, despite your position? Do you feel inadequate to the task? The scale of ruin at Ground Zero is beyond comprehension. It towers over the frail human forms whose tools, impressive in other contexts, appear tiny and ineffectual. There come days and times and circumstances that diminish us all. But gaze upon those

holy arms bared for your sake and take heart. See how Jesus came and how he comes. He came in the very shape of your own vulnerability. *We have this treasure in earthen vessels so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us.* Remember that Jesus stayed and stays close to the dust. Making connections with those whom others brushed aside.

She stood behind him at his feet, weeping, and began to bathe his feet with her tears and to dry them with her hair. Then she continued kissing his feet and anointing them with the ointment. (Luke 7:38)

She ministered to him because his arm stretched out in peace had roused her from the ruins of exile where she'd been cast off by the religious establishment. "What beautiful feet," she must have thought, though surely they were rough and calloused from their daily walk, "what beautiful feet because they do not shrink from me," from the gifts of ministry she brought to him regardless of whomever she did or did not sleep with. "Do you know what kind of woman it is anointing you?" they asked. He knew.

I worry about our interpretation of the gospel that tells us to wipe the dust from our feet when the Word we bear is not received as we see fit. How do we discern when to turn away from a person, place, a people, a quota, a goal? Mighten we confuse the cleaning off of feet with a Pilate-like washing off of hands when attempts at mission don't seem to yield results? It puzzles me that Jesus gives this advice to the 70 when he himself appears not to have followed it.

How often have we despised and rejected the mission entrusted to us and does Jesus shake us off? How often are we captivated by the mega-successes of Babylon, distancing ourselves from those struggling in the rubble, and does Jesus shake us off? Hardly.

They spit on him and pounded the nails into his hands and his feet.

There on Calvary's Mountain - the beautiful feet, the bared arm.

According to Mark's passion narrative, *It was nine o'clock in the morning when they crucified him.* (Mk.15:25) Nine o'clock.

"Teacher, the birds are on fire" ...Darkness came over the whole land.

The earth shook and the rocks were split.

And silence from the epicenter.

My mouth is dried up like a potsherd ...You lay me in the dust of death. (Ps.22:15) *This is my body given for you.*

The Word itself shattered like an earthen vessel. Connection is everything.

On Sunday...Church? on Sunday!...after the attack, when I came back to church with the children who'd gone down to the firehouse, youth choir practice was going on. There was Nikia living with a foster family after being raped by her step-father, Trini who crossed the border from Mexico hidden in a truck under a pile of vegetables, Shakira, Shana and Tyrik, orphaned when their mother died from an asthma attack while smoking crack. Donell, 6 feet and 16 years who ordered girl Happy Meals on the way to Simba Camp so that his orphaned little sisters could get the toys, Jazmine wondering when the virus will turn into full-blown AIDS and take her mother. There was Crystal and the flock of 9 siblings she shepherds to church each week where she herself a teenager rises above a household history fraught with abuse, homelessness, addiction and death to teach Sunday School. They stood there on the chancel singing their hearts out.

And then it dawned on me. It was happening before my very eyes: the ruins breaking forth together into singing. Ruins? Oh No! More than conquerors, washed in our font, their names are written in the foundations of the New Jerusalem. Despite the many-headed beast that seeks to terrify and destroy, they stand before our sea of faces as conquerors beside the sea of glass with tambourines instead of harps, singing the victory song of the Lamb.

Clapping hands! Stamping feet! They rock the church! Rockin' Jerusalem! *All creation stands on tiptoe*, says Paul, *to see all the children of God coming into their own.* The trees of the fields clap their hands! The mountains skip like lambs! He stood among them and said, "Peace be with you."(Jn.20:19)

Peace be with you, Mark!

Peace be with you, Beloved!

His feet brings joy to the scattered ruins pulling them up with extraordinary power to their feet -

Go on your way. See I am sending you out...

And all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God.

Mark, it's simple really... just follow those beautiful feet.