

Abigail Nelson's Sermon at the July 14 Eucharist

"We are in the midst of a crisis of apocalyptic proportions. We are in the midst of opportunity, and the Spirit of the Lord is upon us."

[July 14, 2009] The following is the sermon by Abigail Nelson, senior vice president of programs, of Episcopal Relief & Development, presented at the Tuesday, July 14 Eucharist at the Episcopal Church's 76th General Convention in Anaheim, California. (Video is available on the Media Hub, <http://gchub.episcopalchurch.org/>)

**General Convention 2009
Tuesday, July 14 Eucharist
Abigail Nelson
Episcopal Relief & Development**

Isaiah 61: 1-4
Luke 4: 14-21

Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart, be acceptable in thy sight, O LORD, my strength, and my redeemer.

I can't tell you all how supremely humbling it is to be here with you today. It has literally been 6 years since I last stood in front of a congregation like this. The event at that time, like today's Eucharist, was centered on the Millennium Development Goals. It was a period of hope and change. "Ending extreme poverty is not a matter of resources," said Jeffrey Sachs to the Convention at Minneapolis. "It is a matter of will."

Our church was seized by a spirit of hope and mission. And leading by example and prophetic witness, we have worked through our companion diocesan relationships, through our engagement with the ONE Campaign, in our own personal and collective giving, and in our advocacy efforts. Through the Body of our worldwide church, we have been able to walk together where few others walk... in the City of God favela in Rio de Janeiro, along the steep rice terraces of Mindanao, Philippines, in the wartorn hillsides of Peshawar, Pakistan, and along the flooded cities and cornfields from Iowa to New Orleans... Every single one of us here has been part of our collective family's journey these past few years.

And we carry so many stories... The young man who waited under a tree for 8 hours for me to arrive in a 4 by 4 so he could lead me down the goat paths into his village. The village elders who always ensure you as a guest get to sit in the plastic chair while everyone else squats down on a tree trunk to talk. The women who are lined up for hours, waiting to burst into a welcome song and dance when your car takes you around the bend of the path into their village... The deacon who pushed me back quickly into the doorway when the sounds of gun shots erupted ahead in the alley. These people all say

thank you over and over to me and to you for our collective spirit of mission. Last year at Episcopal Relief & Development we were collectively able to touch over 2.5 million of them. My friend and boss, Robert Radtke has shared with all the houses of God assembled here, the accomplishments of this Triennium. “Carry us in your hearts in all you do,” They say, “For you my brother, my sister, my friend, you ARE here among us too.” In the Spirit of Ubuntu.

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,” says Jesus in the Gospel today “Because he has sent good news to the poor. The prisoners will go free, the year of the Lord’s favor will live among us, debts will be forgiven, land will be redistributed and injustices will be righted.” When stripped down of its technical language, and made bare, this too is the hope held out by the Millennium Development Goals- that we can end hunger, educate all our children, empower all our women. It is the 8th Millennium Development Goal that goal that we talk so little about however, the Goal designed to increase our aid, reorder our trade privileges, and reduce the crippling burden of debt, that I would like for us to hold in prayer today. It too must be addressed if we are to move forward in our collective promise. Today is the year of the Lord’s favor, says Christ today. Today is the Jubilee season.

Imagine the quiet that settles over the congregation as Jesus walks away from Isaiah’s scroll and sits in his seat. Imagine how this promise of land reform and re distribution might sound to someone striving in Haiti or Honduras to feed their family.

And we listen together as family and friends and turn our eyes to Jesus after he closes the reading..... waiting... the word... what is it?

In probably what is the shortest and most controversial sermon ever... “Today,” he says, “This scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

I wish I could speak to you all this morning that succinctly.

When the Millennium Development Goals were signed, unemployment was low in the rich world, pledges for resources were coming into place, we were not at war, Sept 11 had not happened, peace looked possible in many of the world’s troubled spots, and all 191 member countries of the United Nations affirmed them. Now, the global financial and ecological crises challenge us with our personal vulnerability and culpability. We are engaged in a collective confession about our own system failures and greed, but US unemployment is still rising, domestic poverty is still growing, we are still fighting 2 wars. We have seen our own government fail to rescue people flooded within our own cities. And we as a country still only commit about 0.15% of our GDP to overseas assistance, nothing like the 0.7% we promised even at the height of our national sense of abundance.

Now with this looming specter of scarcity upon us, with all our competing priorities- to revamp our education systems, rebuild our financial systems, extend universal health care—The temptation is to address only what looks broken from where we sit, here in our

world, the world of the rich, forget that we are committed to reduce debt, increase aid, and dismantle our trade privileges.

We are in the midst of a crisis of apocalyptic proportions. We are in the midst of opportunity, and the Spirit of the Lord is upon us.

I said this 6 years ago at General Convention, and I will say this again. God did not call us to tinker on the edges of reform, and apply small band aids to the open sores bleeding upon the world. He calls us today, TODAY, to the year of the Lord. He calls us to be ONE, to be whole. In wholeness, we dismantle the systems that harm the oppressor as much as the oppressed. In wholeness we reorder the priorities of our lives, our jobs and our consumptive systems. In wholeness we move from fear of scarcity to joy in abundance.

We as a world have done it before. Remember we outlawed slavery, and transformed a global system that had supported 500 years of conquest, enslavement, expansion, fortune building, and yes global discovery. We let God's people go from bondage. We looked at a world broken by war and destruction and created a whole global system of aid, support and financing, in the World Bank, the IMF, and the United Nations systems at the end of World War II. The creation of Episcopal Relief & Development was part of our response at that time, as an Episcopal Church. We dreamed of a world without conflict.

Just about a month ago, in a conference room at the Waldorf Astoria, the CEOs of the world's major food companies came together to discuss the issues impacting their companies and the planet where their children live. There they all were, Nestle and Tim Smucker of Smucker's Jelly. They discussed new research going into technologies that can increase the yields of food production in Africa, they discussed the growing crisis of obesity in the rich world. They discussed the global food crisis that drove the poor of many countries where they work and have investments to last year break into riots and hold vans of food hostage. They discussed how they might adjust the systemic incentives that currently promote excess among the rich and deprivation among the poor... They looked thoughtful. They are searching for ways forward.

We are in the midst of a crisis. We are in the midst of an opportunity. "Today, this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."

Just about 2 months ago, in another conference room in New York City, about 10-15 of the world's richest people, people familiar to us like Bill Gates and Warren Buffet, and people we hear less about in the US but who are among the richest people on the planet, like Lakshmi Mittal and Carlos Slim. They all met to discuss the decline in philanthropic giving globally, the impact of the financial crisis on their efforts at helping, and finally ways that they might be able to step up and through their foundations and private efforts address the crisis. We are connected to them through our webs of relationships. We are connected.

Who here has ever played the Kevin Bacon game? You basically challenge each other to see how Kevin Bacon, the actor, is divided by six degrees of separation from anyone else. It's quite fun- particularly if you like Hollywood trivia. I would submit to you that through our worldwide church, our Anglican Communion, you sitting here, are separated from Gates, and Buffet and Carlos Slim by 2 or maybe 3 degrees of separation.

And do you remember the saints of God song we all learned in Sunday School? "You can meet them in school or in trains or at sea, in church, or in planes, or in shops or at tea."

Be a saint of God in your connectivity. Imagine the saints of God converting these men of power to a Jubilee calling.

I truly believe that neither of these meetings would have happened 10 years ago. They happened because of the past 10 years of awareness building, and advocacy about ending poverty. They happened because the leaders of the world realize that the sea rising to wipe out the islands of the Pacific might turn into a new weather pattern that wipes out our own coasts. And that the woman who cannot find a job in rural Mississippi no matter how hard she looks, is a victim of the exact same global structures as the man in Guinea whose sale of his cotton crop won't earn him enough to feed his family... We all now live in one system. All is connected.

So we ride bikes with confidence, like Bishop Hollingsworth of Ohio, who after this Convention will ride 4000 miles to raising awareness and funds for the Millennium Development Goals. We walk the corridors of power with a message- in Seattle, in New Delhi, in Davos, Switzerland... assuring our globe's leaders that there is a way forward from this present crisis. We travel the Jericho Road we heard about yesterday from Courtney Cowart and following St. Francis, kiss the leper on the lips, reaching out to the one that we most fear, the one most different. We do this with sacrifice. We do this to the point of death. We do this to the foot of the cross. With courage, and in wholeness, we do this....

Some of you here have known and supported my family through the years, my parents in particular. I think particularly of Bishop Rowthorn who was a great friend to us when I used to play hide and seek in the pews and altars of my father's church. Or I think of the silent multitude of prayer that has held us as a family for over 35 years through the Society of the Companions of the Holy Cross. I am the daughter of many of the injustices that built this country, and the attempts of my ancestors to right them where and when they could in their contexts. My mother is the descendant of African American slaves, and the native Cherokee people who hid among them in North Carolina, refusing to move west to Oklahoma: two peoples who suffered and comforted each other in the haunted spaces of our nation's history. My father's family arrived in Virginia in explorer's ships, and built a life on the backs of slaves working tobacco and rice plantations in South Carolina. They in their turn cast off the oppressive yoke of Britain, signed the Declaration of Independence, and fought a Revolution. My paternal grandmother was a proud Daughter of the Confederacy. My maternal aunt was a Black

Panther. When my father saw and loved my mother in an elevator in Cambridge, MA, it was an Ubuntu moment- 1967- illegal for him to marry her. His bishop refused to ordain him. His family turned their backs on him. It was dangerous for my mother to hold his hand in some places. But they had an Ubuntu vision. And together their generation has built a new family and a new nation, rooted in love, and prayer, some of them under the sacrifice of death. I know I am here because I stand on the shoulders of people like them, and the people among you who supported them and connected to that same vision. So today, we are again at a Jubilee year, another crisis moment, another opportunity to remake our world order. How, in the future, will my daughter stand on our shoulders? Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing. Today, there is in a village in Nigeria a young girl named Anne Woke. She is 9 years old and has sent us a message now published in the new book *Lifting Women's Voices: Prayers to Change the World*. These are her words....

*I gaze and ponder awhile...
At the base of the mangrove I ponder
Rumors of war and death all over the land
Blood spills crying on the ground
Babies shouting in disarray
As parents are snatched by the enemy
A vision to vanquish these wars
A dream desired
.....
I gaze and have a vision
That will lead me to the future
A vision to make my poor parents smile again
An achiever that is looked up to
Having accomplished my educational career
A minister of the word of God I see in me,
Now, the joy, the faith, the laughter
The assurance, the grace of God
My awaited dreams for the world are coming true.*

She believes in us. She is carrying us in her hearts. Will we together carry her dream for her and for us? What will YOU do?

AMEN