

Annual Conference Sermon 2022

June 18, 2022

Rev. Dr. Steven J. Summers

Ephesians 2:1-10 (CEV)

In the past you were dead because you sinned and fought against God. ² You followed the ways of this world and obeyed the devil. He rules the world, and his spirit has power over everyone who doesn't obey God. ³ Once we were also ruled by the selfish desires of our bodies and minds. We had made God angry, and we were going to be punished like everyone else.

⁴⁻⁵ But God was merciful! We were dead because of our sins, but God loved us so much he [God] made us alive with Christ, and God's gift of undeserved grace is what saves you. ⁶ God raised us from death to life with Christ Jesus, and he [God] has given us a place beside Christ in heaven. ⁷ God did this so in the future world he [God] could show how truly good and kind he [God] is to us because of what Christ Jesus has done. ⁸ You were saved by faith in God, who treats us much better than we deserve.^[a] This is God's gift to you, and not anything you have done on your own. ⁹ It isn't something you have earned, so there is nothing you can brag about. ¹⁰ God planned for us to do good things and to live as he [God] has always wanted us to live. This is why he [God] sent Christ to make us what we are.

From Mess to Bless

Good morning! Please allow me to begin this time by offering some words of thanks.

I am Thankful to the entire AC Planning Team, especially The Rev. Eric Vault, Chair, for their exceptional ministry and leadership in making this in-person Annual Conference happen.

I am thankful for our Worship Director Mr. Gerald Ricks and the House Band. They have ushered us into the presence of Christ through their gifts during the entire Annual Conference.

I am also thankful for Mr. Neal Wise, the principal at N E Wise & Associates, for serving so faithfully as our Annual Conference Planner. He is a true pro and one who deeply loves Christ's Church.

And, most importantly, to Bishop Lewis and her wisdom in presiding and selecting the theme for this AC – United as One in Worship.

Finally, I give God glory for our Conference staff and to all the faithful disciples of Christ who worked behind the scenes.

Will you offer an expression of thanks with me?

| |
|--------------|
| Introduction |
|--------------|



I've titled this message *From Mess to Bless*.

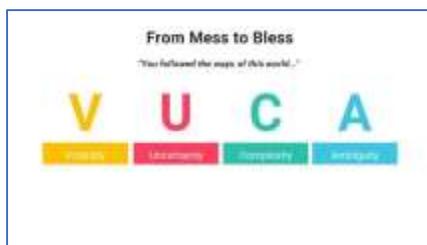
I know it's not a best practice to begin a sermon on a negative note, but let's be unconventional in the interest of getting *the skunk on the table*, to borrow a Bishop Lewis-ism.

If you are willing... will you raise your hand if you believe that we have some pretty significant struggles in the world today."

YES! It seems to me that the world is in quite a mess right now. Just to name a few struggles:

1. The war in Ukraine and the international angst over other geo-political hotspots
2. Domestic violence and mass shootings
3. Rampant racism, both overt and implicit
4. Concerns about a probable US economic recession with the highest inflation rate in four decades. Hey, I bought some gas in Powhatan Virginia Sunday and it was \$4.99 a gallon.
5. Don't forget COVID – right?
6. Even preparing for this Annual Conference...
 - a) Our Conference file server was accidently erased. [We have it back two days later.]
 - b) There were illnesses with critical staff
 - c) Our website host decided to change their server and created all kinds of unexpected issues
 - d) [Others that happened over the AC event this week - ????

Like I said – it's tough out there.



In fact, we live in what some leadership experts have termed a VUCA world.

○ VUCA is an acronym for *Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity and Ambiguity*

- The acronym VUCA was first used in 1987 and based on the leadership theories of Warren Bennis and Burt Nanus out of the U.S. Army War College.
- Bennis and Nanus coined the term to describe the zeitgeist or cultural spirit of the post-Cold War era. Globalization, the internet, and the socio-political economy patently destabilized any sense of normality; the world was in a liminal period of radical flux.
- The world just seemed to be defined by Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity and Ambiguity... and still is I believe.

VUCA can describe large scale contexts and more personal challenges.

Does your world feel VUCA-like or messy at times?

Let us pray



The writer of these scriptures in Ephesians was also in a VUCA-like challenged environment. The world was volatile with social and cultural unrest, there was a prevailing sense of hopelessness birthed by a belief in many false gods. Some folks were the elite insiders; other folks were the oppressed outsiders.

People yearned for the same meaningful existence as we still do this moment in time. The promotion of their self-interests only exasperated the challenges they faced.

The human condition has not really changed all that much. The internet and Cold War are just modern iterations of earlier cultural shifts and Cain and Able-like encounters.

RELEVANT QUESTION

I share this VUCA metaphor to simply speak to the present needs in our lives and communities.

We need to move from mess to bless.

We need to move from mess to bless.

Say it with me, “We need to move from mess to bless.”

BUT **HOW?**

BUT HOW DO WE MOVE FROM A VUCA MESS TO A BLESSED LIFE?

VIRGINIA ANNUAL CONFERENCE, HOW DO WE MOVE FROM OUR PERSONAL AND COLLECTIVE MESSES TO A POSITION OF BLESSEDNESS...

no matter what we are experiencing or will be facing?

BODY

I have two forward-facing steps I challenge you to take with me.

1. The first step is moving from a You/Me posture to a We posture.

Let me just say it out loud, “**Lord; I know I’m all messed up.**”

I don’t want to insult anyone here, but I think we are ALL all messed up. Come on now... doesn’t the Bible say that we “have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God?”

Aren’t we all moving on to Christian perfection?

My point is not to be insulting; it’s to claim the **Truth that WE have in common our messed-up-ness.**

HERE's the GOOD NEWS: We Move from Mess to Bless when we fully embrace that **we** are **all** sinners in need of God's grace. **In fact, the reality of that very confessional unites us as one, giving us a blessing we are way too willing to not acknowledge out of our selfishness and self-centeredness.**

Why does this confession unite us? **Because we all need Jesus, just like they did in Ephesus.** We all need Jesus, not just you or you or you or you or you or me.

We all need... who? Say it after me... ***we all need Jesus!***

Pastor Adam E. Eckhart writes, "A redemptive ethic encourages faithful people to share their stories of how powers influence them. In verse 3 [***the one that states, 'Once we were also ruled by the selfish desires of our bodies and minds. We had made God angry, and we were going to be punished like everyone else,'***] the author of Ephesians shifts from second person 'you' language to first person plural 'we' to admit that 'all of us lived among them in the passions of our flesh.' This admission enables Gentile and Jewish Christians to share their common submission to powers and therefore [***hear this Virginia Annual Conference***] unite them in Christ's redemptive work."ⁱ

Sometimes I begin drowning in messes. I confess I complain about messes that distract me; they divert my attention away from focusing on the ministry of Christ. They erode the fruit of ministry, not because they exist but because of the ways they incline me to self rather than to serve.

When our Bishop sees this happening, or hears my complaining, she will often ask me, "***Can't we just be about Jesus?***" That question is like an autocorrect of my heart, mind, and spirit. The question sticks to my bones – "***Can't we just be about Jesus?***"

Can't WE just be about Jesus and moving from a You/Me posture to a We posture united in Christ's redemptive work?

2. Let's take a second step to God's preferred future for us.

We can and should boldly acknowledge that while our messes are very real and need to be addressed, **our mess does NOT have control over us.**

Our mess does not have to be death-dealing, soul-sucking, millstone around our necks.

The Good news is that the word of God states, "***But God was merciful! We were dead because of our sins, but God loved us so much God made us alive with Christ, and God's gift of undeserved grace is what saves you.***"⁶ ***God raised us from death to life with Christ Jesus, and he [God] has given us a place beside Christ in heaven.***"

Did you hear that, "God raised us from death to life with Christ."

Let me give to a VUCA flipping, mind-blowing, GOOD NEWS reality check – “[God] *has given **US** a place beside Christ in heaven*” - “[God] *has given [not just you or me] but **US** a place beside Christ in heaven.*”

CALL TO DISCIPLESHIP

Acting on this unity of grace to flip VUCA upside-down ... to move from mess to bless... is our call to discipleship this morning. As we depart this Annual Conference may we embrace that *“God planned for us to do good things and to live as he [God] has always wanted us to live. This is why he [God] sent Christ to make us what we are.”*

Let’s set our “me and you” language aside and pick up the **“we” that we so need**. As the Dean and President of Virginia Theological Seminary, The Very Rev. Dr. Ian Markham, writes *“Egotism and selfish preoccupation are both so damaging to our being that our spirit is not alive to God and to love. Our actions are so crippling that our God-intended humanity is dead.”*ⁱⁱ

The mess around us does not control us and when we bite the forbidden apple of our self-wills and having things our way at all costs, so much creative Godly power is wasted. The Rev. Dr. Sarah Calvert, the Northern Virginia District Superintendent, offers a word of challenge to us as a people inclined to frame the world to our will as opposed to the will of God in the power of “we”,

“The energy used to be this creative is astounding. What if we used it for God’s mission? We could be amazing!”

CLOSING

Let’s return to the VUCA metaphor as we conclude.



In 2007 a distinguished fellow at the Institute for the Future by the name of Robert Johansen coined what he calls the *VUCA Prime*. Johansen argues that effective 21st Century leaders need to flip the old VUCA acronym (Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity and Ambiguity) to a new VUCA of **vision, understanding, clarity, and agility**.ⁱⁱⁱ



Virginia Annual Conference, we have a God vision to be disciples of Jesus Christ who are life-long learners influencing others to serve. It’s clear. It’s easy to understand, and it has agility despite whatever mess we face.

Let’s NOT allow our message to be the mess.

The Good News is that **we are blessed** and we have this promise from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, “*I’ve said these things to you so that you will have peace in me. In the world you have distress. But be encouraged! I have conquered the world.*” (John 16:33, Common English Bible). Thanks be to God - Amen and Amen.

Endnotes

ⁱ (Eckhart 2008, 112)

ⁱⁱ (Markham 2008, 110)

ⁱⁱ See <https://emergingrnleader.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/developing-leaders-in-a-vuca-environment.pdf>. Accessed June 8, 2022.

Sources

Eckhart, Adam E. *Feasting on the Word Year B, Volume 2*. Edited by David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008.

Markham, Ian. *Feasting on the Word Year B, Volume 2*. Edited by David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008.