



**Sermon at the
Opening Worship
Service
2004 General
Conference,
The United
Methodist Church,
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FOR GOD'S SAKE— Scrubbed clean and rebuilt

GOD's Message came to me: "Son of man, when the people of Israel lived in their land, they polluted it by the way they lived. I poured out my anger on them because of the polluted blood they poured out on the ground. And so I got thoroughly angry with them polluting the country with their wanton murders and dirty gods. I kicked them out, exiled them to other countries. I sentenced them according to how they had lived. Wherever they went, they gave me a bad name. People said, 'These are GOD's people, but they got kicked off his land.' I suffered much pain over my holy reputation, which the people of Israel dishonored in every country they entered.

"Therefore, tell Israel, 'Message of GOD, the Master: I'm not doing this for you, Israel. I'm doing it for me, to save my character, my holy name, which you've dishonored in every country where you've gone. I'm going to put my great and holy name on display, the name that has been ruined in so many countries, the name that you dishonored wherever you went. The nations will realize who I really am, that I am GOD, when I show my holiness through you so that they can see it with their own eyes.

"For here's what I'm going to do: I'm going to take you out of these countries, gather you from all over, and bring you back to your own land. I'll pour pure water over you and scrub you clean. I'll give you a new heart, put a new spirit in you. I'll remove the stone heart from your body and replace it with a heart that's God-willed, not self-willed. I'll put my spirit in you and make it possible for you to do what I tell you and live by my commands. You'll once again live in the land I gave your ancestors. You'll be my people! I'll be your God!

"I'll pull you out of that stinking pollution. I'll give personal orders to the wheat fields, telling them to grow bumper crops. I'll send no more famines. I'll make sure your fruit trees and field crops flourish. Other nations won't be able to hold you in contempt again because of famine.

"And then you'll think back over your terrible lives—the evil, the shame—and be thoroughly disgusted with yourselves, realizing how badly you've lived—all those obscenities you've carried out.

"I'm not doing this for you. Get this through your thick heads! Shame on you. What a mess you made of things, Israel!

"Message of GOD, the Master: On the day I scrub you clean from all your filthy living, I'll also make your cities livable. The ruins will be rebuilt. The neglected land will be worked again, no longer overgrown with weeds and thistles, worthless in the eyes of passersby. People will exclaim, "Why, this weed patch has been turned into a Garden of Eden! And the ruined cities, smashed into oblivion, are now thriving!" The nations around you that are still in existence will realize that I, GOD, rebuild ruins and replant empty waste places. I, GOD, said so, and I'll do it.

*"Message of GOD, the Master: Yet again I'm going to do what Israel asks. I'll increase their population as with a flock of sheep. Like the milling flocks of sheep brought for sacrifices in Jerusalem during the appointed feasts, the ruined cities will be filled with flocks of people. And they'll realize that I am GOD." (Ezekiel 36:16-37, paraphrased by Eugene Peterson, *The Message*, adapted)*

"For God's sake, help, good people! Mama is in the hospital, and we do not have money for the surgery!" The words are written in crude letters on a piece of cardboard held by a young girl in one of the tunnels of Moscow's subway, the world famous "Metro." On my daily rides to the office, I see people like her, and I hear the voices of others, appealing to passengers in a submissive tone: "For Christ's sake, have mercy! We want to eat!" There are beggars and poor people all over the world. What amazes me is such everyday religious idioms in a country that over decades was looked upon as the bastion of non-belief. Obviously, all atheist propaganda could not destroy a religious language, coming from an old tradition. However, if atheism was not really serious, what about this new religious mood? Is it just another way to express one's need and destitution? Is it "for God's sake" or "for my sake"? Friends, this is in no way to belittle the gloomy situation of those persons and their desperate attempt to make a living. These people need help. They are desperate. And I know many situations that are much less serious, but the name of God is quickly and easily used even in my own words. Do they—do I—make

wrongful use of the name of the LORD?

Reading the words of the prophet Ezekiel, provocatively paraphrased by Eugene Peterson, I could not escape such thoughts. This scripture went under my skin. *Thus says the Lord GOD: It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for the sake of my holy name.* This sounds so absolute. The one who is speaking here is not a user-friendly God. This sentence flies in the face of a religion that is used as an instrument of human welfare and well being. Is this God a self-serving one? "For God's sake" means, according to this scripture, that God is taking care of God-self. God is concerned about God's holy name. The Bible reminds us of God's holiness; every Sunday we proclaim our faith in God almighty. Mr. Wesley is teaching us to pray: "Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts, by the inspiration of thy Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love thee, and worthily magnify thy holy name." Is this enough?

What will we do at this General Conference? Will God have a chance to "put [God's] great and holy name on display," as Eugene Peterson so fittingly paraphrases? To be honest, it's not God's chance that is in dispute but our priorities. Will our first purpose be to honor God or to run the church's machinery or even to get majorities for our proposals and projects? We will have worship service every day. Dear sisters and brothers, this gives us a chance to pause before our God, to calm down and refocus on the essentials. Let our hearts and minds be open. Just to sing "Majesty" is not enough to praise God's holy name.

But how do we honor God? First of all, in accepting how God is taking care of God's honor. "*Message of GOD, the Master: I'm not doing this for you, Israel. I'm doing it for me, to save my character, my holy name, which you've dishonored in every country where you've gone. I'm going to put my great and holy name on display. . . . I'll pour water over you and scrub you clean. I'll give you a new heart, put a new spirit in you.*"

God takes care of God-self in caring for God's people. We human beings say, "For God's sake," and we pursue our own goals. God says, "For my sake," and God exceedingly takes care of those who do not deserve it.

In Ezekiel's witness we meet with this extraordinary biblical story of God's relationship with God's people. They run away; they follow false gods; they are beaten and oppressed and exiled to faraway places. Again and again the prophets have told and retold this story. They have used various images and parables: God the creator, the father, the king, even the unlucky lover. And this story continues. It is the story of a father's steadfast care. He sees his children running astray to the left and to the right. They are leaving full of pride and boomeranging back with their wings

clipped. And the father runs to hug them. It is the story of a mother's tender love. She firmly believes that this child of hers is not bad, however ill. And she never loses hope.

Yes, God is defending the honor of God's name but never on other people's expense. *I'm doing it for me. . . . I'll bring you back. . . . I'll give you a new heart, put a new spirit in you.* God has continued this story, told by the prophets. Jesus has called us to honor God, and he has glorified God's name. He tells us: "*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength. You shall love your neighbor as yourself.*" What he has been telling others, he has done himself, loving and honoring God even against his own will and desire, tenderly taking care of the sick and the wayward and the lost. When he came to the temple in Jerusalem, he restituted God's honor. *Jesus entered the temple and drove out all who were selling and buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the moneychangers and the seats of those who sold doves. He said to them, 'It is written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer; but you are making it a den of robbers.' "* He stood against those who made religion a buying and selling business. He had to pay the price. Soon he was to be sold for 30 pieces of silver. Jesus in his life was keeping God's commandments, living a life of righteousness and without sin. Instead of punishing sinners, he took upon himself our sins and abuse. *For our sake [God] made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.* God in Christ is taking care of God's holy name, on Christ's expense and not on ours. For God's sake!

What "for God's sake" is happening to us? *I'll pour water over you and scrub you clean. I'll give you a new heart, put a new spirit in you. I'll remove the stone heart from your body and replace it with a heart that's God-willed, not self-willed. . . . I'll pull you out of that stinking pollution.* When I came to Russia 12 years ago, I went through some reformation of my understanding of baptism. Some experience gave me really new insights. Our people bring not only a bowl with water; they always provide a towel, too. They have understood that baptism is about really being "scrubbed clean." It isn't a mere symbolic act, where we use just a few drops on the pastor's fingers so that the baby wouldn't cry. *That stinking pollution* of our wasted lives cannot be camouflaged with some perfume. It needs real washing. Many of our sisters and brothers in Russia feel that sprinkling is not enough. They asked to be baptized by immersion. At least they go not as far as our Russian Baptists, who are breaking the ice at zero temperatures to have a baptism. Baptizing by immersion means the pastor or bishop needs to be in the water, too. It is a very peculiar way, how the Lord tells us, "Remember your baptism." We all need to be scrubbed clean. Even if we have developed

some expertise in discovering and revealing the dark spots on other people, we will have no communion with the Lord unless our dark spots have been cleaned, too. Symbolic washing will not do it. Martin Luther once said: "Three hands full of water won't do it." *I'll give you a new heart, put a new spirit in you.* God is renewing us from inward out.

We all need to be renewed and with us, our world. *On the day I scrub you clean from all your filthy living, I'll also make your cities livable. The ruins will be rebuilt. The neglected land will be worked again, no longer overgrown with weeds and thistles, worthless in the eyes of passersby. People will exclaim, "Why, this weed patch has been turned into a Garden of Eden! And the ruined cities, smashed into oblivion, are now thriving!"* Last winter I was visiting with one of our churches in the mountains of the Urals, Western Siberia. This church started a drug-rehabilitation center in a village that had been almost abandoned. The younger population had left, and the old generation is dying out. There are many of those villages in Russia, ruined, smashed into oblivion. In this village used to be a House of Culture. But not much had been left of the building — no windows and no doors but a leaking roof. The heating system was in disrepair, and there was no electricity. The rehabilitation center moved into this house. The first winter they were freezing at temperatures of minus 25 degrees. But with their own hands and the confidence of the children of God, they built a big stove, and they put windows and doors into the building. Coming from various ways of life, they returned to a lifestyle of prayer and hard manual work. Over the short summer they planted a garden to have vegetables for the next winter. When I was there, they had just completed a cowshed. They did not have a cow yet but they were convinced that God would provide one. Therefore, these engineers and office clerks and artists had already learned to milk because they had a goat. (Actually, God used some money from good United Methodists in this land so that they could buy a cow.) Their lives had been changed, and the place was changing, too. Hope had returned to the village. God's promise goes beyond the personal and human interrelationship to change God's world.

So, what are we to do? *And then you'll think back over your terrible lives—the evil, the shame—and be thoroughly disgusted with yourselves, realizing how badly you've lived—all those obscenities you've carried out.* Notice the "then." Whatever we do will be our answer to God's merciful doing to us and to God's world. Because even in dealing with our faults and weaknesses, God is doing this in God's way. God is not the divine persecutor and interrogation officer. God is not interested in our sins and shortcomings. Yes, our fault and sin needs to be named. But God is not in the blaming business. He is the great physician, who is doing the diagnosis to map out the therapy. And it is part of this that we learn to deal with our matters in a new way. We look upon our

doings with shame—and relief. Don't you know that experience from your own lives? *What a mess you made of things, Israel!* What a mess you made of things, Ruediger! Friends, it is important that we understand: It's me, it's us—not the others. The blaming business and the self-defense are over. God is giving us a new heart and a new spirit. This is not only changing us but it changes our relationship to others, too.

Bishop Job reminded us the other day that St. Augustine once said that the Christ in us recognizes Christ in our sisters and brothers. Therefore, we accept each other as renewed persons in Christ. However, if we cannot see Christ in others, it might be our own fault that we have silenced the Christ in us.

God is building this new community among us. It leads to new rules. The way we deal with each other is a visible witness before our world, a sign of the new world.

As some of you may know, I have grown up and lived most of my life under two dictatorial systems, first Nazism and later Communism. Rights of a person had not been guaranteed. In most cases people were just at the mercy of judges and magistrates. We were presumed guilty unless we could prove our innocence, which was almost impossible. I am proud about my United Methodist Church in its judicial proceedings and fair process for people under complaints and investigation. This is not just a sign of civil society. It comes out of the respect that we pay to each of God's children, whether they might be worthy in our eyes or not because we do this "for God's sake." We honor the Creator in each of his works. Transparency and openness, care and circumspection are a witness that is been noticed by the world as different from the style of secular society.

God is inviting us at this General Conference and in this worship service. God will be our God, cleansing us in the water of our baptismal renewal, feeding us spiritually at Christ's table for a new life. We do have the unique chance to live together in this new life for the next 10 days because God's promise will be with us.

Let us praise God for being God, proclaiming God's holy name among us daily. Let us receive the abundance of God's grace, poured out in word and sacrament, in prayer and song. Let us lay aside our preconceived agendas and listen afresh to the words and hearts of our sisters and brothers, even of those with whom we do not agree easily. Let us go beyond the few and the many issues that we so easily single out, and let us acknowledge God's good will for God's whole world in its hurting and pain, that all may believe and be healed.

For God's sake! Amen.