

Dear Brothers,

I am sending you some thoughts for your consideration as you prepare your message for February 17, the 2nd Sunday in Lent, when we celebrate the 60th anniversary of the Florida-Georgia District. The lessons for that Sunday lend themselves to the emphasis we are making on this anniversary: heroes of the faith who exemplify the missionary spirit needed for us go forward as the people of God. In order that your message may have the ring of authenticity, which connects the word of God with the hearts and minds of your people, I am asking each of you to develop your own message, rather than to provide you with a “canned” sermon for the day.

In order that there might be a common thread running through all of our messages, however, I do strongly encourage you to utilize the service materials that Tim Hartner has provided you, and to draw on the lessons appointed for that day. In my estimation, they lend themselves beautifully to the theme we are developing for the 60th anniversary, “Following in Faith.”

The theme, “Following in Faith,” was the title of the first devotion of the constituting convention, February 4-6, 1948 in Orlando, Florida. By God’s grace our District has grown from the original 22 congregations to 191 today with nearly 70,000 baptized members. That growth has happened because our forebears were people of faith who trusted in God, and dared to do the difficult because they were convinced that the seed they would plant and water God would cause to grow. We want to stand in that powerful line and follow in faith. My confidence is that our anniversary activities can help us do that.

To recap the components of the celebration, we kick it off with an emphasis on church worker recruitment, January 27, when Jesus says in the Gospel, “Follow me.” (We need new leaders to expand the mission and to replace those of us who are reaching retirement age!) The Anniversary Sunday itself falls on the second Sunday in Lent, when the Gospel is John 3:1-17, the foundational text for the District’s Core Values Statement. The Circuit Convocations in the Easter season will lift up missionary heroes from the District’s first 60 years; the Bible study will focus on Hebrews 11:1-12:3; and the presentations will help us consider the missionary challenge now before us. The spring regional church worker conferences will strive to help us see how we can serve with joy and vitality under the theme, “Servants—Alive and Well!”

The first lesson, Genesis 12:1-9, highlights God’s call to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth will be blessed.” (Vv. 1-3) Verse 4 says very simply but very powerfully, “So Abram went, as the Lord had told him.” How’s that for an example of faithfulness tied to God’s missionary enterprise?

The second lesson, Romans 4:1-8, 13-17, helps us see how Abraham is the father of all who believe, especially as it moves to its concluding portion, “For this reason it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants, not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham (for he is the father of us

all, as it is written, “I have made you the father of many nations,”)—in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.”

This last phrase is a great lead in to Jesus’ comments in John 3:1-17 to Nicodemus about being born anew/again/from above. Jesus knows what is in man (see John 2:24f.) and so he will not entrust himself to people whose faith is engendered by signs it has seen. He knows that fallen people cannot create faith; it must be generated “from above,” by God. One must be born—a very passive act—through the work of the Spirit. One cannot give birth to himself. That’s impossible. Further, Jesus knows that the Spirit will do his work by pointing people to himself, that is, to Jesus, (John 14:26, 15:26, 16:13-15) who has come down from above (3:13). It’s like the days of old, when people were dying in the wilderness because of their rebellion against God who sent venomous snakes to bite them. The only way they could be saved was to look to the bronze snake erected on the pole by the command of God. (See Numbers 21:4-9.) Don’t ask me how it worked, but it did, for behind the bronze snake was the authority of God. It transcends human logic, but when God authorizes something, it works.

When we recognize our desperate condition expressed in our complaints when we grow impatient and do not get our way, when we are at the mercy of the weather, other people, disease, or death, and then in our desperation we look to the crucified, uplifted Son of Man in faith we experience the new life Jesus told Nicodemus he needed to have. Looking in faith to the Son of Man is to see God’s way of ruling, for the Son of Man came down from heaven because God loved the world. He came down not to condemn but to save; not to reject but to reach out to us. He came down as the sacrifice John the Baptist pointed to: the Lamb of God who takes away the world’s sin. (John 1:29,36) To see the uplifted Jesus on the cross is to see God ruling in grace to bring birth from above and with it life that is eternal. To know that God rules in grace and mercy for his people, that he comes not to condemn but to save and heal, is to live. Seeing and believing that is to be born from above, to be born anew, to begin all over again! That’s life without limit!

To me, this all ties in to the missionary enterprise. People will risk great things for God because they know his love for them. People become missionary heroes when they act on the basis of what God has done for them in Jesus Christ. Children of nature, born with a sinful condition who think they know, who seek to assert their own will, and control matters for their own ends, are incapable of changing themselves. They are reborn by the gracious act of God—the Spirit pointing us to the Son whom God gave for our salvation, and with the pointing, creating in our hearts faith which trusts this God so that we can leave the familiar ways of self-centeredness and embark on the journey of life.

I am convinced that the missionary heroes of our District did what they did because of the God who called them, the God who gave them new birth, the God who saved them from sin, death, and eternal destruction. They served in different ways, but the driving force behind each of them was the same gracious triune God Jesus revealed in his conversation with Nicodemus. In my opinion our challenge today is to help our people see anew how sin continues to affect us—whether by having a faith normed by signs (John 2:23-25), or by a desire to have matters conform to our logic (John 3:4, 9), or by simply being impatient and complaining like the

Israelites (Number 21:4f.)—and how God has been gracious to us in the crucified, uplifted Jesus Christ. The Greeks came to Philip and said to him, “Sir, we wish to see Jesus.” (John 12:21) I believe that your members and guests have the same request of you. In your own way, help your people see Jesus, that they may be enabled to “follow in faith,” and so help us all share the good news of the kingdom of God revealed in him. Under that gracious authority, there is nothing of which to be afraid, nothing that we cannot do.

My hope is that you are aware of examples of heroes of faith who have impacted your congregation, which you can draw on to connect your people to the anniversary. Each congregation should have a copy of *Fields to Harvest*, the anniversary volume published in conjunction with the District’s 50th anniversary. For this anniversary we will be publishing a booklet to be distributed at the Circuit Convocations, highlighting 14 individuals or couples of faithfulness. The booklet will also include the list of donors to Servants for the Future and the names of students preparing for church work careers. Although this booklet will not be published until March, I do have the draft of the mini-biographies which will be included, if someone should like to receive an advanced copy of the text electronically to draw on for a sermon illustration or two.

In closing, let me say that I value your partnership in the Gospel, and am confident that through our 60th Anniversary celebration we can further inspire, encourage, and empower our people to continue the Gospel tradition our District is known for. May the good news we proclaim help them see the God who has acted in their behalf that they might not only enjoy the life their new birth brings them but share its basis with all they can!

Your partner in Christ’s mission,

Gerhard C. Michael, Jr.