

**The Episcopal Address for the 135th Annual Convention
of the Episcopal Diocese of Newark
Saturday, January 31, 2009**

The Rt. Rev. Mark M. Beckwith

Jesus begins his most famous sermon with a litany of blessings – which we have come to call the Beatitudes. We know them best from Matthew, and we get a shorter version in this morning's Gospel from Luke. Both evangelists agree that Jesus' first blessings are directed to those who are in pain – because of poverty, hunger, sadness or the experience of being hated. Jesus sees and hears the pain, whether it is caused by circumstance or human malevolence – and he responds to it with blessing.

This is a common biblical pattern. Generations before the Sermon on the Mount, God hears the groaning of the Jewish people in Egypt, and God pledges to Moses God's *hesed*, which is God's steadfastness (and which sounds more earthy and dramatic in Hebrew than in English). It is God's covenant – that God will promise and provide – and God's people will follow in faith, and be set free.

Public pain gets God's attention. Pain needs to be voiced, because then it can be heard and blessed – and then be turned into energy and hope. Pain that is ignored, swallowed or hidden turns to despair.

We Christians claim that joy and hope emerge for those who have the courage to endure suffering. And certainly there is a measure of pain in our common life right now. I have seen it and heard it. As economic turmoil continues to shake the foundations of institutions and the finances of individuals and families, not one of us has escaped being affected by uncertainty. All of us have been held hostage by economic chaos; some feel like unlucky prisoners of circumstance – and still others mourn their losses to the degree that they have felt hated because there seem to be no options or opportunities. The people to whom Jesus preached live among us -- indeed they are us.

Many of us have felt blessed by the inauguration of a new President, who brings a unique combination of eloquence, intelligence and steadfastness to leadership. I can't remember a time in our national life when my spirit was so lifted as it was when I joined 2500 people at NJPAC to watch the inauguration. But the tectonics of the economy are still shifting – and President Obama acknowledged that as he described our world as it is – clearly and without hesitation. The financial ecology is in crisis – and for the moment it overshadows the crisis of environmental ecology – which has been around for a lot longer. It is an unnerving place to be; a frightening place to try and stand – and gaze with hope into the future.

It is important to identify where it is that we are. I would submit to you that we – all of us, have found ourselves in the wilderness. As companies close and people lose jobs – and as savings shrink, our communities suffer. Many worry and weep in isolation, some bring it out into the open. Our congregations – and by extension the diocese, have suffered in terms of lost or

reduced pledges. Several clergy who were engaged in full-time ministry in 2008 have been reduced to part-time status in 2009. Outreach budgets have been slashed, and critical building maintenance is being deferred. We are trying to figure out what to do—and how to do it. We are all trying to make do with less.

We have been culturally conditioned to see the wilderness as a place of emptiness – and increasing scarcity. It is a place of threat, which yields more threat. It is the place where people pace and panic; it is the place where there is an overwhelming desire to simply get out

We are not the first people to find ourselves in the wilderness. Our spiritual ancestors spent 40 years in the Sinai wilderness, on their journey from Egypt to Israel. While they groaned in Egypt, they murmured in Sinai, at least at first. And then – after their groaning, complaining – and their reverting to old comforts of idol worship, they centered down and sorted things out. And they learned. They learned that – instead of just getting out, they needed to go through. And in going through, they recovered their nerve and put their full trust in the God who had led them there in the first place.

On their journey, they discovered things about themselves. They discovered their God-given oddness – which had been rubbed away during their captivity in Egypt. They adopted some basic rules that enabled them to live in a community of free people rather than as captives or slaves – rules that were provided by God in the ten commandments. . They discovered that they needed a visible symbol of the *hesed* between themselves and God, which they could carry with them in the wilderness – the instructions for which God provided, as they built the tabernacle of the Covenant together. And lastly – and perhaps most importantly, our spiritual ancestors discovered that the wilderness is a unique place of God’s abundance and miracle. They discovered that the wilderness was a place where they saw water gush out of a rock and manna appear on the desert floor – food and drink that God miraculously provided.

As we go through our own wilderness, our spiritual ancestors point the way. We can rediscover our oddness – which involves daring to place our security in a divine love that we can’t see, rather than in assets and protections that we can measure. Our oddness emerges from the conviction that our wealth is determined by what we give rather than what we own. Our value is counted by what we share rather than by what we accumulate. We would do well to re-discover that rules for living are designed to help open up our relationships with God and each other – to a deeper level of freedom and trust; rather than to serve as a threatening catalogue of punishments and resentments. We would do well to re-discover that whatever we build together as a Christian community, we do so in the spirit of *ubuntu* – which calls us to recognize the giftedness of everyone – and our interdependence on these gifts; rather than seeing others as competition or as a means to an end.

Being in and moving through the wilderness means re-discovering manna – seeing manna, identifying manna, eating manna – and expecting manna to come again. Manna is God’s promise that we can trust and use.

As it turns out, every week – in every one of our diocesan congregations and communities, manna is placed before us. It is not a miracle that the altar guild places bread and wine on the

altar, but it is indeed a miracle what happens after it gets there: that as we gather as community in prayer and blessing, the bread and wine are infused with the life, death and life of Christ – so that when we eat it, we are ingesting new life – an ever repeating miracle.

The Eucharist is our common manna. But each of our congregations has its own unique manna story. Do you know yours? It may have happened last week or last year or last decade – or even in the last century. It was a moment when God’s abundance showed up, at a time when there seemed to be nothing but emptiness. It might be a story when resources appeared out of nowhere, or a healing happened after a long season of disagreement, if not pitched battle, between various factions in the community. It could be a story of transformation, or a story of abundance. Or several stories. Learn that story. If you can’t come up with one, listen some more. If it is a symbol, put it in a jar (as our ancestors did when they had a two-day portion for the Sabbath). If it is a story, put it in a frame. And don’t hang it on a wall or store it on shelf – but at least once a year place it on the altar and bless it and share it in a such a way that people learn to trust that manna is God’s promise, the divinely issued visa for a journey through the wilderness.

Holding up manna is not an academic exercise, but a spiritual discipline that connects the community with God’s abundance – and at the same time releases our imaginations. God wants for us to imagine – God yearns for us to imagine – and the world needs our *ubuntu* of imagination.

A dominant image for the past year in our diocesan life has been the gates of hope. As I have talked about the gates – the core values, of worship, spiritual formation, justice/nonviolence and radical hospitality at each congregational visit, my imagination has been quickened and deepened. And now I am literally wearing the gates of hope on my new chasuble, thanks to the creative artistry of Colleen Hintz, (who has become the unofficial diocesan vestment designer extraordinaire). My stole, which you can’t see, has the word “hope” written on it in thirteen different languages (including Braille). As I am enshrouded and yoked by these images and words, no doubt I will, over time, be taken to even deeper levels of imagination – and a greater appreciation of the core values’ potential for innovation and impact.

As I have tried to stand with Christ at the gates of hope – and as I have watched individuals and congregations stand with Christ at the gates of hope – I have noticed that they swing in and they swing out. I have learned for myself and I have seen in congregations, that we tend to have more confidence and ability in having the gates that swing in – swing in to the values of worship and spiritual formation. Typically, these gates take us inside our buildings – where we gather, where we find ourselves grounded in God, where we are guided by the ancient story and where we are fed by Christ’s manna and are embraced by the community. We follow the gates in to worship and spiritual formation – so that we can travel deeper into Christ’s transforming mystery, deeper into commitment – so that imagination can be kindled and passions ignited. (During my time as bishop, I have learned – and ironically I learned it most dramatically during my recent sojourn in the wilderness experience for bishops, which was officially called the Lambeth Conference, that any conversation can go deeper – and any horizon can be stretched farther). If we adopt a greater discipline in worship and more intention of spiritual practice, we will avoid getting swept up in the various whirlwinds that inevitably kick up in the wilderness without warning.

The gates of hope also need to swing out --swing out with the values of justice/nonviolence and radical hospitality. As the gates swing, I have noticed – in myself and in our congregations, that there is often some rust on the hinges -- either because of our lack of confidence or the gates' lack of use. Or because the commitment to justice/nonviolence and radical hospitality is confined to conversations held inside our buildings, and don't translate into action outside of them.

They gates need to swing out – and we need to go out, so that we can find out where people are murmuring or groaning – or in hiding; because we need to remember that we are not the only ones in the wilderness. With what I call confident humility, we can claim that we have some valuable spiritual tools for living in and going through the wilderness – tools that we can share with others. We can listen, and listen some more – and then respond – by organizing, by inviting, by connecting the manna that God provides on the altar with the manna that God provides in the community. They are mysteriously linked. God's abundance is not just confined to the church. It is up to us to discover where else God is working – and to risk being changed by it.

When we swing the gates out, barriers between the church and community fall. And then – and this is harder, we need to help deconstruct the walls that stand between one northern New Jersey community and another – separations that are marked by economics, but more often by culture and class. It is a witness – and it is a social leveling/ bridge building, that we can undertake – and indeed are undertaking. Perhaps the greatest privilege in serving as your bishop is seeing the many creative ways that individuals and congregations connect the life of the church and the life of the community by feeding, sheltering, educating, advocating – and joining hearts with those whose stories are not like ours. It seems to me that the Episcopal Church in general and this diocese in particular are ahead of the curve when it comes to connecting with community. But more can be done – and my challenge is that more needs to be done – because as globalization packs us into tighter interdependence, the financial crisis has created a paradox in which more and more people are living at toxic levels of isolation – which is a recipe for extinction.

During my visits to congregations, I meet with members of the Vestry – and I ask them four questions: what do you want to celebrate as a congregation, what are your challenges, what's next – and what do you want to ask or tell me, their bishop? When it comes to challenges, invariably I hear several Vestry people say “more people and more money”. I acknowledge the concern – which is sometimes a groan, but more often a rumbling murmur, but as I hear it over and over again, I am drawing on some wisdom gathered from our ancestors who learned some important things in the wilderness.

We don't need members who can't tolerate discomfort or who will bail if the temperature of anxiety or tension get too high. (what scholar and British rabbi Jonathan Sacks calls people who engage in 'limited liability spiritual practices', which are people whose spirituality is not connected with community). We need disciples. People who will claim their oddness, their *hesed* with God, who will develop community norms that make this oddness the norm for membership – people who will relentlessly look for manna in the church and in the community. We need disciples, which are people who will live with discipline – and will work at developing

a rhythm of life in which the gates swing in and out. We need more disciples – who are people who sense the urgency and trust the promise.

And we have them. Oh sweet Jesus, do we have them. Everywhere I go, I find people who are hungry for God, and people who will help feed the spiritual, physical and justice hunger of others. They are among us. We need more of them – and we need to practice the discipline of gates swinging in and gates swinging out.

Part of the discipline is to have a spiritual pattern – a rule of life – but again, with confident humility, to discern what impact we will have. A recent article in the Harvard Business Review suggests that organizations that have a missional purpose – and that includes the church, need to have an intended impact statement. Being nice and warm and welcoming isn't going to cut it. God's blessing is also a power – and God expects us to use it. To what end? As God's disciples, bearing God's abundance, what do we want to have happen when we teach or feed or advocate or shelter? What is our purpose as disciples and congregations? Sorting all this through, and deciding – not just once but over and over again, requires a boldness that God wants us to claim.

To that end, I will outline specific plans and actions as the day progresses. We have divided the Convention into four sections – worship, finance, ministry and mission – and I will have a short presentation during each.

We all need to be challenged to engage in a stronger sense of discipleship – employing all four gates of hope. The rule and the rhythm can get better – especially around embracing the Sabbath, which is about rest, yes; but even more importantly, good Sabbath generates creative imagination.

I take counsel from Gandhi – and his admonition to stand with those who suffer. And to stand nonviolently. I am more and more committed to the challenge that we are called to bear God's blessing – and to abjure (to use Gandhi's word) the temptation to curse, which is verbal violence – and which happens as much from a look or a gesture as it does from a word. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, Paul writes in his letter to the Romans. For me, that is a clarion call for nonviolence.

The pain and the crises of our world, our nation and our diocese are real. God knows that. The invitation is to claim the abundance and feed on it, and feed others with it. The abundance is there. Let us learn the blessing, welcome the miracle – and trust the hope. Amen.

**Remarks delivered by The Rt. Rev. Mark M. Beckwith during the 135th Annual
Convention of the Episcopal Diocese of Newark
Saturday, January 31, 2009**

Bishop's remarks – Finance

Our wealth is determined by what we give rather than what we own and that our value is counted by what we share rather than what we accumulate. In 1989, the Diocese of Newark dropped the parish assessment system and embraced a 50-50 giving model -- 25% to the diocese and 25% in ministries that did God's work in the world. It reflected the commitment that giving is indeed an important spiritual practice.

I think it is meet and right to continue with a voluntary program – as opposed to an assessment system, but I also think – that after 20 years, we need to revisit this important dimension of mutual ministry. Our current practice is not often well understood, and mutual accountability is often absent. To address this, I will be appointing a Stewardship task force, to report to the 136th Convention with recommendations and proposals for any canonical changes. I will ask this task force, to be made up of clergy and lay people, to look at the prospect of establishing minimum percentages of giving, percentage ranges of giving. I will ask them to evaluate the current schedule which requires – by diocesan canon, making a percentage pledge to the diocese by December 1 – and requires a reconciliation of the previous year's percentage against actual income by January 1. The intent is to create a diocesan community of greater collaboration.

In light of collaboration, the Role Clarification Task Force, which is made up of representatives from the Standing Committee, Trustees and Diocesan Council – will take on the work of developing a protocol for the distribution of financial assets that result from the sale of extinct parish buildings. There are a lot of needs and opportunities that can be addressed from the proceeds of these sales – and having the three senior bodies of the diocese involved in that conversation is critical to an open and deliberative community. Recommendations from this group will be forwarded to Diocesan Council for approval.

I will be appointing a Task Force to assess the opportunities for a Diocesan Capital Campaign. There are a host of opportunities and challenges that beckon more ongoing financial support. These include, but by no means are confined to, moving the offices of Episcopal House and the offices of the Cathedral into a new space within the neighborhood of the Cathedral; refurbishment of the Cathedral, capital needs at Cross Roads Camp – and a permanent endowment that will support congregational vitality. This group will begin to fashion a capital budget and articulate a “case” for diocesan wide participation, even in the face of economic downturn.

There is one initiative of a Capital Campaign that I am ready to announce. In 1988 this diocese created the Ward J. Herbert fund, in honor of Ward Herbert, long-time Diocesan chancellor, Diocesan Trustee, Vestry member and Warden at St. Andrew's and Holy Communion in South Orange. Since its inception, the Ward Herbert fund has given out nearly \$3 million in grants for the repair of parish buildings.

We are going to create another fund, this time to support ministry and vitality in congregations through the proceeds of a permanent endowment. It will be named in honor of a long standing member of this diocese who – for me, is THE model of what it means to put faith into action. It will be the Marge Christie fund. (Marge, will you stand up). Marge is a Diocesan Trustee, Trustee of General Seminary, Treasurer of North Porch, leader at Christ Church, Ridgewood, and that is just for starters. Marge was one of the first women – if not the first woman, to be a deputy to this Convention. Marge was one of the first women, if not the first woman, to be a deputy to General Convention. Your passion and wisdom – and ability to agitate, and agitate graciously and tenaciously, for the rights of all people – but especially women and children, is extraordinary – and legendary; and I cannot begin to tell you what an honor it is to set up this fund in your name. The fund will provide resources to congregations which are able to connect imagination and impact. Marge, thank you.

Bishops Remarks -- Ministry

I want to thank the Commission on Ministry for the hard work at looking at the full spectrum of ministry – and their acknowledgement that the Commission needs to be expanded in number to give adequate attention to the ministry of the laity and the diaconate. (The canonical change memorializes this commitment).

The COM, Christian formation commission and I have been talking about creating an annual day or weekend for discernment. For those considering the priesthood, the diaconate – or a new direction in life and ministry that may not involve ordination. We will do this discernment together; we may explore doing this discernment with the Diocese of New Jersey – and we will endeavor to bring some renowned people from across the country and the church, to help lead us in these discernment events.

I am also asking the COM to work with me in developing creative programs for raising up priests who have non-traditional ordination preparations, programs that have been successfully used in other dioceses, notably Texas and Western New York. We will be consulting and learning more about what is commonly identified as bi-vocational priesthood – as we can create a model that suits and serves the Diocese of Newark.

The presence of 25 deacons in our diocese has been an enormous gift to the parishes they serve – and to our life together. Most of our energy in the past few years has been taken up in identifying, training and ordaining new deacons. We will continue to be about that work – as I am of the conviction that we need more deacons among us. Yet as we move forward, there is a need for greater management and coordination. To that end, in addition to an archdeacon, we will have a deacon in charge of discernment and deployment, and another deacon in charge of diaconal community organization – a team of deacon leaders which will work closely with me.

As clergy have been offered the opportunity to engage in peer coaching, we will be providing that opportunity for Wardens in the diocese. An information/training session will be held on Saturday, March 7 from 9:30 to 3 pm at Church of the Saviour in Denville. David Rynick will be the facilitator, who has been doing this with bishops for about four years – and our clergy for

the past 18 months. Our clergy peer coaching network has attracted the attention of other dioceses, and I suspect that our lay leader coaching network will as well. Registration information may be found on our web site. Coaching is a process which invites peers to help each other identify – and then realize, their goals.

Over the past year, I have been in conversation with several of our clergy, leaders at the national church – and at General Seminary in New York, to create an urban internship for young people who want to stand with the living Christ – in the city, at the gates of hope. There is a growing commitment – among young people – to engage in meaningful service. Teach For America, which is in its 20th year, and which places college graduates in underserved educational settings – has become the largest employer in some colleges and universities. The church needs to engage young people who are eager to serve. The cities in the diocese have enough churches and church related ministries – along with a stronger and more trusting interfaith community, to provide a unique action/reflection opportunity. We will continue to develop that.

Bishop's Remarks – Mission

Several opportunities in mission that are in front of us.

The Rev. Canon Ed Rodman, who is on the faculty at EDS in Cambridge, Mass. -- who is the author and creator of anti- racism training program in the Episcopal Church, will be with us in the diocese on Saturday, March 28. He will be consulting with Mission to Dismantle Racism committee, the Reparations Task Force, the leadership of Union of Black Episcopalians, and the Inclusion Work Group of Diocesan Council in the early morning – to help us sort through how to best to continue the important work of anti-oppression understanding. Ed will give a public lecture at 11 am – at the Cathedral Offices at 24 Rector Street in Newark -- followed by lunch.

The Rev. Stephanie Spellers, an Episcopal Priest and author of Radical Welcome, which provides a framework and curriculum for engaging in radical hospitality, will be leading a workshop for us on the first weekend in May. Stephanie will be the first of many leaders and writers in this area to be brought to the diocese to help train our congregations and clergy to be more effective in swinging out the gates into radical hospitality.

I have been conversations with various public relations professionals about opportunities to tell our story better. One professional has offered to lead a workshop for clergy in framing the congregation's story for the media. We have received a proposal to help us update our communication strategy – which would include video clips on our web site, face book engagement – and helping us to tell the story of our 110 congregations – which is the diocesan story of justice and radical hospitality to a media and culture that is either uninterested or can only focus on the family feud aspect of the Episcopal Church. Public relations, marketing and branding are areas where we need to smarter and more effective. We have begun learning – and soon we will begin implementing.

Finally, there was some excitement across the state in February, 2007, when Civil Unions became legal in New Jersey. However, in the nearly two years since, the new law has revealed

that civil union is – at best, half a loaf. It has exposed an inequity in the rights and privileges for gay and lesbian couples to have their life-long relationships recognized and blessed. In this next year, I will engage the office of bishop – and my voice as bishop, to work for marriage equality in this state. At the General Convention, in my work with the Chicago Consultation, a national network based in Chicago – and which includes several other leaders in this diocese, I will work for the inclusion of gay and lesbian people at all levels of ministry.