

*Sermon transcript: "What Shall We Now Do?" - Bishop William T. McAlilly  
Tennessee-Western Kentucky Conference Organizational Meeting – 12/04/2021*

The word of God for the people of God. Will you pray with me and for me now? Oh God, our help in ages past, our hope for years to come, our shelter in every storm of life and our eternal home. We pause and give you thanks this day for the great gift of your love, your grace, and your mercy. For the power that has worked in us and through us over these last years to come to this moment, to celebrate the work that you're doing through the Tennessee Western Kentucky Conference of the United Methodist Church. Bless this time. Help us yield our will to yours as we seek to do your will on this earth. And now Lord, may those who hear me and see me, see not me but see you and hear you. Give us your grace and grant it in this hour. In the name of the Christ, we pray. Amen.

Well, once again, I'm deeply disappointed that we are not in the room together for yet another session of annual conference. We had planned, we had hoped, we had considered ways that we might do this safely. And then when we had another rise with another variant of the virus to emerge as we were doing our planning, we felt it best that we again do annual conference in a socially-distanced virtual way.

I regret that. You have no idea how deeply I regret that. However, I am happy to tell you that we will be in person for annual conference 2022. We will be gathering at Brentwood United Methodist Church, June 15th through 17 in person. We're grateful that Brentwood has again agreed to host. And we look forward to that historic first gathering of the Tennessee Western Kentucky Conference in June.

I'm also happy to tell you, Lord willing, we expect to be hosting annual conference in 2023 in the city of Memphis at the Renaissance Convention Center. We hope by the end of the month that we will have a contract in hand and signed and that plan will be move moving forward. Then in 20-, I lose math 2024, we will be back on the east side, as we call it, in Lebanon. Those are our plans going forward. We move back and forth so we honor all.

Well in some ways it seems to me, I don't know about you, but it seems to me as if we have been living in a perpetual advent since 2012, planning and preparing, anticipating, working so that we could come to this moment and we could enter into shared life that spans from the Mississippi River to the Cumberland Plateau, to the Purchase Area of Kentucky.

I often reflect as I move across our area, how our early forefathers and foremothers rode the circuits. Some by horseback, some by canoe, some by flatboat across the rivers of Tennessee and Kentucky to spread the gospel. Thanks be to God for these Wesleyan missionaries who gave their life in bravery to allow a church to be planted and expanded in area for generations. The Tennessee and Memphis Conferences have sent forth pastors and prophets to preach repentance and prepare the way of salvation for those God has given to us, the United Methodists. And it's in their footprints that we stand and on their shoulders we stand. We have prayed, and we have served, and we have continued to walk the walk and talk the talk, leading and leaning into that which God is revealing to us.

Well, not only have we prayed, we have listened. We have planned. We've organized. As good Methodists do, we have organized. And we have struggled through difficult conversations as we made this journey. In this lingering advent season, this long journey that begun September 1st, 2012, we have prepared for this very moment. And it's in that spirit of prayer that I'm drawn to now in this prayer from our advent season.

Here now pray with me this prayer. Merciful God, you sent your messengers, the prophets, to preach repentance and prepare the way of our salvation. Give us grace to heed their warnings and forsake our sins that we may celebrate aright the commemoration of the nativity, and may await with joy the coming in glory of Jesus Christ, our redeemer who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit. One God now and forever. Amen. .You see the good news of the gospel is that we stand on the shoulders of the prophets, of John the Baptist, of John and Charles Wesley, of Francis Asbury and Thomas Coke. We

stand the shoulders of countless pastors and laypersons across the Memphis and Tennessee conferences who have preached the gospel so that the kingdom of God might come closer to the earth in our part of the world.

We are indebted for their faithfulness and their labor in the kingdom of God. We do stand on their shoulders, thankful for the one whom we proclaim this advent season is also the one to whom we look, Jesus, who is the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, says the writer of the Hebrew letter. And with his reading from Luke's gospel for this coming Sunday, Jesus stands on the shoulders of John the Baptist. Even though John acknowledges, he is not even worthy to stoop down and untie his sandals.

I don't know if you're a Simon Sinek fan, but no doubt you have heard somebody speak about his book titled *Start With Why, How Great Leaders Inspire Everyone To Take Action*. What Sinek is doing in this book is inviting people to a larger vision of life, a sense of purpose and a sense of belonging. He might be a United Methodist.

God was forming a people who knew their "why." Throughout the Old and New Testament, God consistently was inviting persons to follow him so that they might know him and invite others to follow him. In church talk, we call that evangelism. It's what we do. [foreign language 00:07:11]. It is the good news of the gospel we proclaim. So right here at the beginning of advent and the beginning of the Tennessee Western Kentucky Conference, we are being reminded of the why of the gospel. So come with me, come with John the Baptist to the wilderness of Israel. See the barren land. See the dry places. See the rough plains. In the heat of the day it's almost unbearable to stand without shade. In the night it is lonely and it is cold. It is so cold, chill bumps will appear on your arms in those cold nights. And here comes this strange, weird looking dude named John the Baptist. Sackcloth and ashes he wears. I always sort of pictured him as Yule Gibbons eating grape nuts for breakfast.

And he's saying prepare the way of the Lord. Straighten out the path. Every valley will be filled. Every mountain and hill will be leveled. The crooked way will be made straight. The roads will be made smooth and all flesh, all flesh, not just some flesh. John says, all flesh will see the salvation of God. John's pointing to a new way of being in the world that Jesus will usher in. He's not the guy, but he's preparing us for the guy, right? Certainly John's disciples wanted to get on board with this. And so they ask, "Well, John. John, what should we do?" They're a little nervous. John's sermon's pretty harsh. Methodist preachers don't get away with preaching sermons like this. They just don't.

They say, "John, what should we do? What should we do?" He says, "Well, I noticed George that you have two coats. You might consider giving one to somebody else. You don't need two. I've noticed Sally that you've got more pairs of shoes in your closet that you can wear. You might want to consider sharing your shoes with some, for those who don't have shoes." He says to the tax collectors. They say, "Well, John, might we do?" "Well, don't collect more than you should."

I want to suggest to you that John the Baptist knew his "why." And he was the preacher of the day that announced that one is coming. One is coming, and folks wanted to get in on that. I mean, if you hear there's some really preacher moving to town, ears perk up, you hear the name. You go online and watch the sermons from his former church. We used to couldn't do that. There are no surprises anymore.

All sorts of folks wanted to get in on the mission. Now, what I want to say to you right now is that if you can hear my voice, if you're within the sound of my voice, I want you to become reacquainted with your why. I want to suggest to you that John the Baptist knew his why. He was the preacher who announced the one was coming. Folks wanted to get in on that. We want to get on that too. John knows his why. John is asked after he preaches his fiery sermon on the banks of the Jordan River a question I've heard some of you ask, "What should we do?"

John has practical advice. Give a coat. Don't don't take too much money. Be fair to everybody. John's clear. The soldiers, "What should we do?" More questions, more questions. "Are you the one? John, are you the Messiah?" And he reminds the motley crew of followers that one is coming and you might want to get ready. And come he does. And the world and you and me have not been the same since he came.

He's coming. "I baptize you with water. He's going to baptize you with the Holy Spirit." So John's clear about his why. But may I also suggest to you that Jesus is also clear about his why. Step over to Luke chapter four. We're not going to read that right now. Well, let me just share a little bit of it. He's quoting Isaiah. He goes home, his home church. He's invited to read the scripture in the worship service.

He's the young up and coming leader of the community. They like him. He's popular among the people. And he's given the scroll and says, "Here you read today." Well, if you've ever been home, if you're a preacher and you've ever gone back to your home church, you always get to do something. I used to go back to my home church every Christmas Eve. And they would always bring me in to read the Christmas story and help serve holy communion at Christmas. It was a great honor.

And Jesus reads the spirit of the Lord is upon me because he's anointed me to proclaim the good news to the poor. He sent me to proclaim freedom for prisoners, the recovery of sight to the blind, to set the oppressed free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. Now, when Jesus preaches his sermon, he gets run out town. How many of you have been run out of town for a sermon you've preached lately, pastors?

Well, with this foundation, I want to invite you to grasp a vision of a future that is unafraid of what God is calling us to become in this moment. I want to invite you to join me on a journey of becoming the kind of communities of faith that the world needs right now. I want to be both transparent and clear. My thinking is formed by three authors, leaders in their respective fields. One is Kavin Rowe. He teaches theology at Duke Divinity School. He's written a book called Christianity's Surprise. Another is Greg Jones. You will remember Greg spoke at annual conference a few years ago. His most recent book, Navigating the Future, Traditioned Innovation. And finally an Episcopal bishop by the name of Andrew Doyle, The Church Amplified for the Future. He's the one who introduced me a few years ago to the VUCA world, volatile, uncertain, chaotic, et cetera.

I also want to tell you what else informs my thinking. And it is you. I want to tell you what I believe about you. I believe that the people called Methodists in the Tennessee Western Kentucky Conference are people of soulful character. I believe that you're seeking to cultivate transformational relationships and networks. I believe in that in your heart of hearts you desire to develop a pioneering spirit that pushes into the future in ways that illumine the present through the wisdom of the past. We don't let go of the past, but we allow the past to inform our future. It is both an inward journey and an outward journey.

I also believe that you have the potential to help all persons find the opportunity to flourish in a chaotic world. I believe that about you, the people of God. The reason I believe this about you is that you have said yes to Jesus. And yet, sometimes our yes to Jesus rather gets sidetracked by the pundits and voices who are nothing more than spin doctors of a false narrative about the church. Yet I know, I know you, and I know you love Jesus Christ. And I know that it is Jesus Christ who tells you who you are and what you are becoming. And it is in Jesus' name that you have been baptized.

You will remember when Martin Luther was having a bad day, he would put his hand on his forehead and he'd say, "Martin, remember you're baptized. It is Jesus who calls you by name." But if we are not careful, which is to say full of care, we might from time to time, fall off the edge of cynicism. We will become cynical because we have lost our "why." I have never met a person who knows their why who

has become cynical. But quote, Greg Jones here, "Pursuing purpose is no trivial matter." People with purpose stop thinking about themselves and become fascinated with the work that at hand.

So number one, John knew his why. Number two, Jesus knew his why. It's rooted in Luke chapter four. Now I would like to share with you a word about my why. When I raised my hand nine years ago to offer myself for this daunting opportunity of being a Bishop in the United Methodist Church, I did so because I understood my why. 11 months earlier, our son Chris and our daughter-in-law Millie adopted Thomas. Thomas was a blessing to our family. We were so thrilled that he came to live in our household.

And I began to think about Thomas as I was walking into this moment of offering myself as a bishop. And I kept praying about what kind of church will Thomas inherit? What kind of church will Thomas's children and grandchildren inherit? And it was the during that time, some of you will remember, that I came across some words in a song, God of the City. I Googled the word greater things, and when I Googled greater things, John 14 verse eight comes up. And I began to pray about and meditate and study this text from John, chapter 14, in which Jesus is having a conversation with Philip and Philip's freaking out because Jesus is telling him he is leaving.

And Jesus says, "Philip, if you'll just put your faith and trust in me, greater things will you do than I have done." Now, there have been some people who have laughed at me because I have had the audacity to believe that Jesus still makes that promise to us. Well, a lot's happened in our tribe over these last nine years. Our tribe, our immediate tribe, has increased from one grandchild to five. And now I have to think about Thomas and Micah and Bo and Iris and Mack, and what kind of church they are going to inherit. And I've got to stay focused on my why.

But I have to tell you, there have been a few moments over the last few years when my why has wavered. I think it's naive to think that when we understand the why of our lives, God will make the path easy. I mean, after all, John the Baptist is arrested and Jesus is crucified. That kind of gives you an idea of what's up for us, right? And often those who follow Jesus are questioned.

I've been thinking about this. I think when I pick up the pen and paper to write my memoirs, I shall call my memoirs by this title, *That Time I Was Questioned*. Naively, in May of 2016, when I said yes to the question, "Are you willing to preside at general conference?" I thought, "Well, you know, I've presided now for about four annual conference sessions. This won't be a big deal." The asking person said, "You know, this will be a light session. Won't be much to it. You'll get through it. No sweat."

Well, as it turned out, I was on the hottest seat of United Methodism in a recent history before a thousand delegates and thousands of others observing in person and online. Maybe you were one of those. I recognized a young man who accused me of giving hand signals. Those who know me know that I talk with my hands all the time. It was odd that I would be questioned in that way.

And then it happened. I recognized another delegate who started out by saying, "With all due respect, sir." Now when somebody starts a sentence "with all due respect," you can be sure they mean no respect. "With all due respect, I rise to ask you to replace yourself with a more fair, moderate bishop as presiding officer." And I was stunned. I was speechless. I thought, "Well, I don't know of a more fair, moderate bishop in the church than me." It was as if my "why" was being questioned.

It was as if everything I had given my life for, every child I'd baptized, every teenager who had knocked on my door at night because she was afraid to go home. It was every couple for whom I had said those big and important words "for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer." It was for every hospital bed I had stood by and held the hand of a friend whose life had slipped away and entered the unhindered uninterrupted presence of almighty God. It was every sermon I'd preach. Every prayer I had prayed. Every appointment I had made was suddenly being called in question. And in that moment, my why wavered.

I wish I could tell you it was the only time. My why wavered earlier this year when I was presiding in a contentious local church meeting where an angry man yelled, "Are you a dictator?" My why wavered again last summer when the SEJ Bishop spoke a word about systemic racism and it came this time in the form of a letter from a member of a local church in our area who, with an angry tone, wrote things to me that I cannot speak from this pulpit or in a worship service. And my why wavered.

I wonder, has your why wavered recently? I've listened to our clergy who have told me the challenges leading their congregations in the midst of the pandemic when well-meaning Christians had walked away from congregations because of disagreements about safety protocols during the pandemic. And while not one pastor has come to me and said, "Bishop McAlilly, I can't do this anymore." Not one. In fact, I suspect more than a few of our pastors have checked their pension balance, however, in the last several months and wondered what other employment possibilities might there be for persons with 20 years of church leadership experience.

One of our lifelong friends, one of Lynn's best friends from high school, shared a story, a tense moment in her family with her grandson and his parents. And the little fellow said, "Mama, can you just show me a little grace?" Out of the mouth of babes. Friends, I speak this word to our laity, our pastors need a little grace right now.

One of our pastor told me that his church people have come to their daycare because they require masks. And there are other persons who have left their daycare because they require masks. That's our world, right? Can I just encourage our congregations, just to show a little grace, please. I do not know a single pastor who does not desire, deeply desire, to be a faithful leader of the gospel of Jesus Christ, and lead their congregation to greater faithfulness. I know not one. And I give thanks by the grace of God that you have continued to step into the future with faithfulness. We have con continued because of something greater than ourselves, greater than our worries, greater than the challenges we have encountered and not allowed the fire of the Holy Spirit to be quenched in our heart of hearts.

You who have been named and claimed in your baptism continue to live God's why on the path God has given you. You who have said yes to Jesus understand in a profound way your why. You who week-in and week-out gather faithfully to live in the reality of this wilderness time know what your why is. And I give thanks to God for the resilience of our lay and clergy in the Nashville Episcopal area of the future, Tennessee and Western Kentucky Conference.

I remembered the other morning a song that had meant something very special to me some time ago. And I went to, where else, Google for the lyrics to see if I remembered them correctly. The song *Go Light Your World* by Kathy Troccoli. Maybe you remember the song. "There's a candle in every soul," she sings. "Some brightly burning, some dark and cold. There's a spirit who brings a fire, ignites a candle and makes his home." She sings, "So carry your candle, run to the darkness, seek out the hopeless, confused and torn. Hold out your candle for all to see it. Take your candle and go light your world."

I cannot think of a better sermon than that song. I cannot think of a better mission statement for myself personally than the lyrics from this song. As I prayed about today, as I pondered this perpetual advent, we have lived, our team has listened. I've told you that. Melinda Britt is one of our finest leaders. And she said to me over and over again, "We've held the door open long enough for us to walk through it. Thanks be to God."

So John has a why. Jesus has a why. You and I have a why. May I also suggest that we have a why. It's not my why. It's not your why. It's the collective we, our why. Some of you know that I believe God speaks to me through dreams. And early this morning, I have to tell you that I got a message. Really, I'm not kidding you. This really happened this very morning.

It was not some Damascus Road experience, but gently as I was waking up, it was as if God was giving me the word he needed me to say to you today. And the messenger in the dream said to me, "Tell them Matthew 22 and Matthew 28." And I knew exactly what he meant. "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, and soul. Love your neighbor as yourself." Matthew 22. And Matthew 28, "Go therefore into all the world and make disciples of all nations, baptizing and teaching." These two verses together are the foundation not of my why, but of our why.

In fact, immerse yourself in Wesleyan theology and over and over again, you'll discover these two, along with Matthew 25, are our marching orders. You ask Matthew 25? Well, yeah. "For I was hungry and thirsty and sick and in prison. When did you visit me?" Yes. Yes, Matthew 25. In fact, if you hold Matthew 25 over here, and Matthew 22 and 28 over here, you'll be a church. But what has happened to our denomination and to our churches is either we're going to be Matthew 25 churches, or we're going to be Matthew 28 churches. And John Wesley didn't teach that. He said, "You got to hold it together."

So you ask what now? What shall we now do? The simple answer is we do Matthew 22. "Love God with your heart," everything you got. And love the people God loves. Love them well, those who are your neighbors. Matthew 25. Just read it. Sick. In prison. Hungry. Without clothing. That's what we're to do. And Matthew 28, "Go and teach and preach and make disciples of everybody." Now, nowhere in any of these texts, does it say, "Judge your neighbor." Nowhere. You see, friends, God's call upon our lives is not difficult to understand. Really it's very simple. Do that which God is laying before us.

Now, friends, I want to say to you today that in this season of uncertainty, God is not finished with us. God is not finished with your congregation. God is not finished with what we are becoming in this new chapter, our life together as Tennessee Western Kentucky. This is the beginning. This is not the end of a journey. It's the beginning of a journey.

And let me be clear. Despite what some would want you to believe, God is not finished with the United Methodist Church. God is using us, and will continue this new conference to offer Christ to a hurting world one neighborhood at a time. How is he going to do that? We're going to keep doing what we've been doing.

We're going to keep trying to develop transformational lay and clergy leaders. We're going to keep focused on investing and empowering young people. We're going to continue to be engaged in the mission field through partnering with our communities. And we're going to empower fruitful and faithful congregations who make disciples that make disciples. By the way, did I say this already? We call that evangelism.

We don't need to forget how to make disciples. So you ask, "Bishop, what now shall we do?" Well, let me give you a hint. The other Holy Spirit moment this morning came in the form of an advent display my wife, Lynn, had placed on our mantle in the house. There was a hymnal and there was a book of poetry by Ann Weems. I'm sitting in my recliner, putting the finishing touches on this sermon. And I see Ann Weems. And I remember a poem by Anne. I think it was in her book, *Kneeling in Bethlehem*, not *Kneeling in Jerusalem*, which was on the mantle.

And so I found Ann's poem. Listen to the words: "The church of Jesus Christ is where a child brings a balloon. It's where old women come to dance. It's where young men see visions and old men dream dreams. It's where lepers come to be touched. It's where blind see and deaf hear. It's where the lame run and the dying live. The church of Jesus Christ is where daisies bloom out of barren land. It's where children lead and wise men follow. It's where mountains are moved and walls come tumbling down. The church of Jesus Christ is where loaves of bread are stacked in the sanctuary to feed the hungry. It's where coats are taken off and put on the backs of the naked. It's where shackles are discarded and kings and shepherds sit down to life together.

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The church of Jesus Christ is where barefoot children run giggling in procession. It's where the minister is ministered unto. It's where the anthem is the laughter of the congregation, and the offering plates are full of people. The church of Jesus Christ is where people go when they skin their knees or their hearts. It's where frogs become princes and Cinderella's dance beyond midnight. It's where judges don't judge and each child of God is beautiful and precious. It's where the sea divides for the exiles. It's where the ark floats and the lamb lies down with the lion. It where people can disagree and hold hands at the same time.

The church of Jesus Christ is where night is day. It's where trumpets and drums and tambourines declare God's goodness. It's where lost lambs are found. It's where people write thank you notes to God, and where work is a holiday. Where seeds are scattered and miracles are grown. It's where home is. It's where heaven is. It's where a picnic is communion and people break bread together on their knees. It's where we live responsibly to God's coming. Even on a Monday morning the world will hear an abundance of hallelujahs."

Can you just say hallelujah?

Hallelujah.

Hallelujah.

Hallelujah.

Thanks be to God. We are pressing forward with God's call upon our lives to be the people of Christ in this place as a Tennessee-Western Kentucky Conference, because why? We know, we know our why. Remember Matthew 22, Matthew 25, and Matthew 28. That's enough to get you through.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. And the church said-  
Amen.