



## 117<sup>th</sup> Annual Council of the Diocese of West Texas

### *Introduction of the 2021 Diocesan Theme*

Each year, going back to the start of Bishop Lillibridge’s tenure in 2006, our Diocese has had an annual biblical theme to inform and guide our life and ministries together. I’m not sure how many of you can recall through the COVID fog to last year’s Council, when the theme was announced: “With the eyes of our hearts enlightened,” from Ephesians 1. As the pandemic settled over us, the verse became more important to me than I would have imagined. When so much is going wrong, or not going anywhere at all, how do we keep our eyes open, pray for the grace and wisdom to see more deeply, to see the life and love of our God present and active in our midst?

During the Pre-Council meetings, I told you that I had chosen a verse from St. Luke’s Gospel, chapter 10, as our theme for this year: “Nevertheless, the kingdom of God has come near.” (*“Sin embargo, el reino de Dios ya esta cerca.”*)

I settled on these words of Jesus this past summer, when everything was pretty well shut down. We were in some of the most difficult days, cut off from one another, facing uncertainty and anxiety in almost all parts of our lives. The recurring themes for almost all of us were of confusion, isolation, anger, disappointment and despair.

“Nevertheless, know this,” Jesus tells his disciples, “the kingdom of God has come near to you.” In the midst of so much that was going so wrong in our lives, in our churches and in our world, Jesus’ words brought a bold hope. The stubborn tenacity of “Nevertheless”—his resistance to despair and his insistence on hope struck me deeply. It was a living word I needed, and need to hear. It’s a theme to withstand all the corrosive themes that infect us.





In the passage where our theme is embedded, Jesus is shaping up 70 disciples to send out, two by two, to speak and act in his Name. He begins by saying, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few. Pray, therefore, that the Lord of the harvest will send out more laborers.” This is good and promising. There is a need and an opportunity, and these disciples have answered the call. Maybe they see themselves as the answer to Jesus’ prayer for more harvesters.

But then, Jesus goes on, “I’m sending you out like lambs surrounded by wolves.” He tells them to travel light, and to understand that they will be welcomed by some and rejected by others. His words that they will speak will be embraced by some, ridiculed by others. Some days will be clear skies and open roads, and other days will be snowstorms and busted water pipes. “But know this,” Jesus says. “Know this. Nevertheless, the kingdom of God has come near.”

Jesus is assuring them that life’s circumstances and events don’t dictate the movement of God’s kingdom. Rejection and frustration don’t determine its movement. Pandemics and politics don’t limit and define the Kingdom’s movement. Herod and Caesar and religious leaders don’t. Only God is God. God speaks, and the Word becomes flesh and dwells among us, full of grace and truth; and the living Word, Jesus Christ, announces, brings and embodies the Kingdom.

You and me...the Church...*your* church...*We’re* now joined with those 70, and called to be those who “seek first the kingdom,” in all times and places. And to seek—and point toward—the Kingdom not only when it’s convenient or easy, but maybe especially in harder and darker times, times like these. Whether everything is sunshiny or filled with clouds and gloom, we’re to be Kingdom people, telling and living the good news that the Kingdom has come near. Nevertheless. We are not simply imitating what Jesus does. We are participating in his life, participating in his saving work.





“Nevertheless...*sin embargo*...” is a word of grace-filled resistance, a refusal to surrender hope and give up in despair. A friend pointed out to me that “Always the more” might be the opposite of “Nevertheless.” And so, as disciples of Jesus, our hearts and minds are attuned to searching expectantly for the “more” that our Lord offers in a time of much less, the expansiveness of the Spirit’s work in a time of limitations. Our *resistance* to despair, ironically, begins with a *lowering* of defenses, a trustful surrendering of our wills to God’s will, of our ways to the Way of Jesus, a willingness to abide in his love, trusting (as an old prayer has it) “that Thou art doing for us better things than we can desire or pray for.” (BCP, p. 831)

This theme didn’t come to me in a dream, and no task force recommended it to me. I have been a witness to its truth. “Nevertheless, the kingdom has come near” has been given voice and shape in countless ways across this Diocese. I have seen this good news fleshed out in the life of your churches, as you reshaped, regrouped and restarted ministries and worship. I’ve seen it the ways you learned to care for one another, and your communities. I’ve seen all that you *have* done in spite of all you could not do. I’ve seen it—with the eyes of my heart enlightened—in the ways the diocesan staff, like you, adjusted, re-adjusted, and kept on holding together and doing the work...in spite of everything and every good reason to just walk away. What I’ve witnessed, and have seen again as recently as the storms of last week is just this: “Nevertheless, the kingdom of God has come near.”





### **Diocesan Theme Introduction Reflection Questions:**

1. What does "God's Kingdom" look like to you? In what ways does it manifest in your life?
2. Which moments have felt the hardest to endure in the past year?
3. Where have you witnessed tangible glimpses of God's Kingdom in the midst of those difficult moments, if any? Where were there bright spots?
4. How do you feel God might have been working in those difficult moments?
5. What are practices you can implement regularly to help you notice and perceive God's presence in your life? What are obstacles that prevent you from doing so, and how might you overcome them?
6. What are tangible actions, programs, or ministries that your congregation offers that you feel are outposts of God's Kingdom on Earth? How might God be inviting you or your congregation to love and serve those that are suffering, abused, isolated, or broken?

