

**A New Thing!**  
**Episcopal Address**  
**Bishop Sharma D. Lewis**

**Scripture: Isaiah 43:18-19**

**“Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. Behold I will do a new thing, now it shall spring forth; Shall you not know it? I will even make a road in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.”**

**Celebration/Introduction:**

“I will bless the Lord at all times; his praise shall continually be in my mouth. My soul makes its boast in the Lord; let the humble hear and be glad. O magnify the Lord with me and let us exalt his name together.

My brothers and sisters as I reflect upon my 9 months being here in the Virginia Annual Conference, I am humbled to be your Bishop and excited to stand before you this afternoon to share that I have driven 7823 miles since September 1, 2016.

God placed upon my heart to visit all 16 Districts and as a result – the Chat and Chews were implemented. During the Chat and Chews, I have seen 3255 individuals, traveled to 16 Districts, held 32 sessions with clergy and laity separately, engaged in dialogued for 128 hours, and traveled 3712 miles in an 8-month duration.

Beloved, the Chat and Chews set a fire in my soul to take a deep dive and learn all about the (four Virginias) as Dr. Lovett Weems, Distinguished Professor of Church Leadership at Wesley Theological Seminary, described in his research. If you attended, my Inaugural Installation, at Reveille United Methodist Church, I challenged you that – It was time to **“Stir Up the Gift of God”** which is in you.

I shared this past September that:

To stir – means to agitate things a bit

To stir – means to disturb

To stir – means to shift

To stir – means to shake up and wake up.

As a result, of the **“Stirring,”** we have started the 3-Minute Stir developed by Nick Ruxton and Paulo Lopes, the Latino/Hispanic Clergy Caucus, the Virginia Conference Committee on Immigration Outreach, the Glory Sightings, the Chat and Chews and Reading the Bible in a Year.

Well ... today, my brothers and sisters, God sent me here to share that “A New Thing” is in the air -- which is our annual conference theme taken from Isaiah 43:19 ... now listen to the word of God?

**“Behold, (repeat BEHOLD!!!) I will do a new thing, now it shall spring forth; Shall you not know it? I will even make a road in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.”**

Beloved, how many of you would agree that God is up to something in the Virginia Conference? How many of you would agree with me that it is time to be intentional about creating a culture of disciple making? How many of you would agree with me that it is time for us to identify, equip and deploy “emergent” leaders sitting on pews by fostering a culture of call?

How many of you would agree that it is time to stop playing Church and to start being the Church; by demonstrating the “transformations” that has occurred within us as the result of an absolute commitment to Jesus Christ.

Beloved, I believe that God wants to do a new thing in Virginia; and to capture this “new thing” (this new spirit). We must **1) change our focus; 2) clarify our focus and 3) commit to God’s plan.**

Beloved, as we examine the text for this afternoon, Isaiah’s writings to the children of Israel came at a dark period of their history. They were in captivity they had lost everything and punished for their sins and rebellion against God. However, God wanted them to know that even though they were chastised they were not forsaken. God wanted to give them a “fresh start” or a “new beginning” in life.

As we examine the text beginning in verse 18 --““Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past.

Beloved, to capture this “new thing in Virginia;” we must **change our focus** and stop looking backwards. My brothers and sisters, it is time for a new mindset.

We cannot allow any past failures of the lack of church growth, the lack of professions of faith, the decline in worship attendance or the inability to pay apportionments to prevent us from being the annual conference that God has called us to be. There has to be a new vision that thrusts you into a new season. God does a “new thing” in order to produce a “new theme’ in your life. Beloved, every next level of your life will demand a “new you.”

We must “forget about what has happened before and start looking ahead.” As I listened and engaged with several clergy groups and received letters from laity, some of you have been hurt by clergy, by laity, by the system or just disappointed in The United Methodist Church. I stand before you as your Bishop to apologize for the hurt and pain that some of you have endured and to challenge us together re-write some “**new narratives**” in the Virginia Conference. We are covenant brothers and sisters in ministry, laity are valued, woman can lead large churches, young clergy will have a denomination to serve, that small churches can grow and we will respond to human suffering.

We need to understand that God is far more interested in our “future” than in our “past.” If we are constantly looking backwards and “stuck” in the past; then we cannot “see” where we are going.”

If we are constantly looking at “what” we used to do and “how” we use to do it -- then we will never “See” the new thing that God has for this Annual Conference. We cannot live in the past and we “cannot” live on yesterday’s faith; there is nothing wrong with memories and reminiscing – but we cannot stay in the “past.”

Secondly, to capture this “new thing” we need to **clarify our focus**. One may ask – “as Methodist what should be our focus?” Well I am glad you ask.

My brothers and sisters it is imperative as United Methodist that we are clear that the **mission** of The United Methodist Church is to “**make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.**” In addition, the vision of the VA Annual Conference, which I will share on Sunday, will encompass the mission and clarify our focus as an annual conference for the next quadrennium.

My brothers and sisters as we clarify our focus– we must see our future as possibilities instead of problems. What I find exciting about this text is that the prophet Isaiah clarifies that God will make a road in the wilderness and rivers in the desert. That God can take the desert areas of your life and turn them into fields

of blessings. The children of Israel had a choice. They could view their past or they could focus upon what God wanted to do in their lives.

I do not believe that God wants us to be “wandering” individuals lacking focus. Some of us spend too much time chasing the wrong things in life and miss what God desires for his people.

Please do not tell me what my God and your God cannot do.

**Because, the last time I checked – my God**

Sits high and looks low: my God

Will put food on your table and clothes on your back: my God

Will fight your battles: my God

Will never leave you or forsake you: my God

Parted the Red Sea: my God

Delivered Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego: my God

Healed the woman with the issue of blood: my God

Was pierced in his side: my God

Bled and died...”

Lastly, to capture this “new thing” we must **commit ourselves to God’s plan**. Psalm 37:5 – states to “**commit**” your way to the Lord, trust also in Him and He shall bring it to pass.

Commitment is an agreement or pledge to do something in the future.

Commitment is the state or quality of being dedicated to a cause.

The overall question for us this afternoon – have we committed ourselves to the work of the Kingdom? (Not your church, not your district). Have we committed to love our brothers and sisters – no matter what color, race gender or sexual orientation? Have we committed as United Methodist to practice scriptural holiness?

Whether you are conservative, progressive or centrist have we decided that the souls of our brothers and sisters are more important than our theological agendas. It was John Wesley who stated – “**you have one business on earth is to save souls.**”