

Installation of the Rev. Neal Robert Blanke
St. Paul's Lutheran Church ~ Pomona, CA
Isaiah 61:1-3
Romans 10:14-17
John 10:11-16

I suspect that at least some of y'all know what the Hope Diamond is. The Hope Diamond; the short version is that it is huge, beautiful and expensive. It certainly has a colorful history. Thievery, a perceived curse upon the stone, as well as the remarkably unsurprising reality that everyone who has possessed this jewel is as greedy as a hog in a pigpen – the history of the Hope Diamond reads like an Agatha Christie novel. It used to be named “The King's Jewel” or “The French Blue” but now it is simply called the Hope Diamond. The reason it is called the Hope Diamond is rather mundane – the surname of the family who last owned it is Hope. It's a necklace. It is 45 carats and surrounded by a crazy amount of other, more ordinary, but absolutely brilliant diamonds. Its estimated value is \$350,000,000.

Let's say the necklace is going on exhibition and you are in charge of transportation, security and display. How many of y'all would walk into the Smithsonian, take the diamond out of its display case, put it in a paper lunch sack and then hop into your Camry and off you go on tour? I'd like everyone to take a good look at this character, this gentleman who is being installed as pastor of St. Paul's Lutheran Church of Pomona. Seriously, take a look. He's pleasant enough to look at, I guess. Well-groomed, his teeth are pretty much straight, there's no dirt under his fingernails but do you know what the Rev. Neal Blanke is? He's a paper sack. All these gentlemen in white robes and red stoles – they are paper sacks. I'm not trying to demean or insult anyone. I rather like pastors. Typically, pastors are a happy bunch of guys. Why is that?

Here are some of our problems. We deal a lot with people who are sick, people who are low on hope. Death is one of our daily considerations. Tragic things happen to people we love, people to whom we are supremely devoted. A pastor's heart and mind are constantly on those who are struggling with some difficulty or another and we don't separate ourselves from those concerns. Sheep who stray from the fold, days where self-doubt troubles our spirit, and pastors are not impervious to personal problems – family, health, relationships. And yet, on the whole, pastors are the most pleasant, cheerful people I have ever been around. Why is that? We are nothing more than paper sacks. But what do we carry? What jewel does a pastor carry?

It is God's will, God's design that the ongoing ministry of the Lord Christ should be carried out by pastors. St. Paul wrote this: “We have this ministry in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us” (2 Corinthians 4:7). The glorious death and resurrection of the Son of God is carried around in a paper sack, a jar of clay. Pastors are of good cheer because we know what God has done to rectify the problems of sin and death in this world. Pastors are of good cheer because we know what power is vested in His Word and Sacraments. Pastors are of good cheer because we know that the Lord Christ is active to bless and sustain His people, to love them and extend His grace to them, and bring them to Himself. Pastors are of good cheer because we know that there is a Good Shepherd who rules His church.

Jesus was heaven's diamond. He was worshipped, honored, and adored in His eternal kingdom. And He came pursuit of you. He leaped off His royal throne and took up residence in the womb of a Virgin. She too was a paper sack. But in her belly was the King of Creation, the Diamond of salvation. Jesus took up the form of a servant – Immanuel, God with us. He had no comeliness or beauty or majesty that we should desire Him. Commonplace, ordinary – but in Him all the fullness of the deity dwelled in bodily form (Colossians 2:9). He looked like a paper sack. He was content in our humanity. Love for you led Him to humble Himself. Genuine love; genuine humility – and yet He is the Strongest of the strong. This Shepherd took action. The Good Shepherd lays down His life for the sheep. The wolf comes and death comes with him. And the Good Shepherd does not flee.

Why? Why does the Good Shepherd not flee? Do you suppose that Jesus didn't know what His crucifixion would mean? To be sure, only by directly experiencing something do you really know what it is like, but Jesus knew exactly what was being asked of Him. Why does He not flee? He knew what torment He would face. He knew that He would bear your sin. He knew that His Father would pour out His wrath against sin on Him, that He would suffer the just punishment for it all. He knew and He didn't flee. Jesus knew that all sin and all death all judgment would be located in Him and Him alone and He did not flee. Why? Come down from the cross, if you are the Christ (Matthew 27:40). Why does Jesus lay down His life? Because you are His sheep. He can Shepherd you in no other way. He is determined to lay claim to you, to wash you in His blood, to deliver you from hell, to shatter the tomb and bring you to heaven. That is the God you worship. That is the God whose life animates this Holy house. That is the God who calls this Servant of the Word to preach His Gospel.

Pastors are of good cheer because they are saturated with this Word and they bring it to people, many of whom treasure it highly. Pastor Blanke is still a paper sack. He knows, like the rest of us know, that it is Christ and He alone who is the diamond of God's glory. And Jesus is active. It is He who shepherds your soul, but in this place, He will do it through this man, this paper sack, this jar of clay. When pastors know that it is the Lord who is shepherding His people do you know what they become? They become strong and confident and gracious and courageous and loving and humble and good. "No servant is above his master. It is enough for a servant to be like his master." That is what a pastor wants to be; in some small but beautiful way to be like Christ. To serve you, to preach good news to you, to console you with Christ's love when you hurt.

But we don't manufacture such things. It is God who is at work in you – all of you – to be like Christ. You have been crucified with Christ in baptism and raised a new creation. The old is gone, the new has come. Jesus' ministry in our era is remarkably vibrant. The Good Shepherd is keen to care for your soul. There is a wondrous continuity between the risen Savior and the new pastor St. Paul's. Jesus said this: "As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you. And He breathed on them and said: Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone their sins they are forgiven" (John 20:21-23). God sends pastors. God sends this man. He will stand in the stead of Christ in your holy assembly. The Lord has commanded Pr. Blanke to bring the sweetness of forgiveness to your ears, your soul.

About His servants, Jesus said this: He who hears you, hears me. The living voice of Jesus enlivens this holy house. The glory of the resurrection is in the mouth of this paper sack. The priceless words of the Upper Room will flow from this jar of clay and Christ's body will be brought to your hungry mouths; Christ's blood will quench your thirst for righteousness. The glorious diamond of Christ crucified and risen shines at St. Paul's. Sitting at Jesus' feet we all become strong and confident and gracious and courageous and loving and humble and good. May the indomitable life and the ongoing ministry of the Lord Christ bring you continual good cheer.