

**Installation of Stan Olson as President of Wartburg Theological Seminary  
Dubuque, Iowa  
April 2, 2011**

Isaiah 40:6-11  
Romans 10:13-17  
Matthew 9:35-38

Grace to you and peace Jesus' name. Amen.

It is a great joy for me to be with you this day but—more than that—to join with you to give thanks to God for being part of a church that sees theological education and formation as our shared vocation. It is a privilege to lead a church that has located that vocation in eight exceptional seminaries but shares that vocation, which is widely dispersed throughout this church.

This day we give thanks especially to Wartburg Seminary. The buzz I hear among bishops is that when a Wartburg Seminary grad comes up for assignment, they know they're going to get a pastor who preaches the gospel with clarity and who loves to be part of a church together in mission that is connected locally and globally and rooted in congregational life. That's not a bad affirmation. [Laughter] It sets the bar.

I also want to thank all of you who were part of the Spirit's working in leading you to call such an exceptional president for this next chapter in Wartburg's life. You have called in Stan Olson one who has been formed in the academy as a scholar, shaped in parish ministry, led in synodical oversight and mission, and most recently served in churchwide ministries with a special focus on education and vocation of all the laity, as he will remind you. And you have called one who also is getting uncomfortable that I have exceeded the words he allotted me to talk about him. [Laughter] We pray God's blessings on this partnership for the gospel upon which you have embarked.

The buzz I heard downstairs, Stan, already from your colleagues here is, "We are filled with hope." Our hope is in Christ and our hope is for Wartburg's leadership. You can't get any better than that.

**Voices and Feet**

This Wartburg Seminary community is all about voices and feet. Please take a moment to hear your voice, whether with your ears or eyes through signing. Listen to your voice hum any note. Greet your neighbors. [Humming in audience]

It is all about voices and feet. Lest you forget the feet part in the course of the sermon, I brought a reminder, a foot. [Puts foot sculpture on podium] I try to unsettle the homiletics faculty as much as I can right off the bat. [Laughter]

Wartburg Seminary is a rehearsal—not a recital—hall. You have gathered as a community of practice, not performance. Yes, a rehearsal hall, so that you will get up there and—when you get up there—you will lift up your voice and your voice will be heard.

Did you hear the prophet Isaiah anew in those old, familiar words? "Get you up to a high mountain" (Isaiah 40:9, NRSV). Well, maybe that is not what you expected to hear this morning. Perhaps you thought you would be challenged to come down out of the beautiful ivory (or is it limestone?) tower. Don't get me wrong—that is good advice to follow—come down into the world, among God's people. There are many opportunities

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for sermons on coming down, denying yourself, humbling yourself. May I suggest there is a strong possibility that most of us Lutheran pastors have those sermons down pat, but they are not for today.

This day is for hearing and heeding the prophet Isaiah's command to "Get up there!" That is right wherever "there" is for you—whatever place is your mountain, your tower, your pinnacle, your place of prominence. You may have such a place. It may be a seminary presidency or professorship. It may be the office of bishop or the pulpit you occupy in a parish call.

Now I can hear the sigh of relief moving through the assembly, "Oh, the bishop is talking to those people—those people of prominence in the church, recognized public leaders in the church. So you go bishop. You preach to those folks. I'll let my mind drift off a while. I will catch up with you when you get back to that foot thing at the end of the sermon."

Sorry. No exceptions this day. For I believe everyone here has a place to which Isaiah is pushing you to "Get up there." Get up there where your voice will be heard. It may be in your vocation as a grandparent. It may be where you gather with colleagues in the workplace. It may be at a citizens' forum. It may be at the implement company. It may be in the choir or classroom.

Yes, wherever it is, it is about voices and feet. Don't lose your voice. Lift up your voice. Tell whomever will listen. Here is your God! What an audacious claim: here is your God!

But how will you know God is here? Because you have been in the rehearsal hall of Wartburg Seminary, you have experienced God's presence in the assembly of the baptized, gathered for worship around the means of grace. You have studied the sacred texts. You have read the historical record of heralds over the centuries. You have been formed by the wisdom of scholars, theologians and the witness of fellow students and faculty. You have been shaped by the people of your home congregation. You have been inspired by the testimony and evangelical perseverance of students and leaders from global companion churches and ecumenical partners. You've been shaped by the faith of people in internship congregations and hospitals.

So get up there! Lift up your voice with strength. Do not fear. Your God is here. Your God is here, the one who loves you with a love from the beginning of time. The one who showed up in Jesus, lifting up his voice to heal the sick and befriend the outcast. The one who showed up, lifting up his voice for justice for the oppressed and mercy for the afflicted. The one who lifted up his voice to forgive sinners and pray for those who crucified him.

Here is your God on the cross, enduring its shame for all those who are ashamed and have been shamed. Here is your God, the one who raised Jesus from the dead, the one whose Spirit is being poured out lavishly upon us, yes, people of every description, people on both sides of every line we draw in the sand of who is acceptable and who is not acceptable among us.

Oh yes, Get you up. Lift up your voice. This is *your* God, the one who formed you, found you and claimed you in the waters of baptism. The one who gathers you into the community that bears Christ's name and Christ's redeeming love to the world. The one who calls you, Stan. The one who calls each one of you: the confident, trusting, liberated child of God, ready to serve the gospel and the world.

What is at stake in the rehearsal hall is not the reviews that you may receive for your performance when you go out there into the recital hall called the world. No, what is at stake in the rehearsal hall is the lives of the hearers. It's the practice hall of Wartburg Seminary, where you will be reminded again and again, that it finally is not about you. It is about the hearer, who deserves to hear the good news that your voice announces, the good news of Jesus Christ. It is not finally just about your voice, but their ears. "So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ" (Romans 10:17 NRSV). Yes, it is not finally just about your voice because ears are the birth canals of faith.

Oh, but we do not get to stay in the rehearsal hall, and some people wish they could because it can become a comfortable environment. We learn in the rehearsal hall the skill of critiquing one another, analyzing and, yes, dissecting one another's theological articulation, homiletical proclamation or exegetical interpretation. Don't get me wrong. Those are wonderful arts to learn in the rehearsal hall.

But you cannot be content to practice and critique in the rehearsal hall because, "‘Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.’ But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him? And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent? As it is written, ‘How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!’" (Romans 10:13-15, NRSV).

Yes, it is all about voices and feet! So, church, lift up your voice. Let it be heard above the voices of those who want to drown out your voices with their relentless critiques that no leader, no one in this church called the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, can be trusted anymore. Lift up your voice—not defensively—but proclaim there is one in whom you can trust, Jesus the Christ. There is one in whom you can trust, the God who is faithful to God's promises to God's people.

Lift up your voice to those weary from feeling helpless and harassed. Tell them of the God who feeds God's flock like a shepherd, who gathers us up into God's arms, carrying us in God's bosom and gently leading the mother sheep. Tell them of the mercy and compassion of God's heart.

Lift up your voice. Let it be heard above those who want to mute your voice with their constant shouting about everything that is wrong in this church and culture and who is to blame.

Lift up your voice. Tell them about what God is doing to make things right. Let the cruciform pattern of Good Friday's aching loss, Holy Saturday's forsaken absence and Easter Sunday's astonishing new life become the coherent narrative that is woven throughout your testimony in your preaching and worship and in your witness to the one holy, catholic community to which we belong.

Get up! Lift up your voice. Let it be heard. The time for whispering among Lutherans is over. We're not a whispering church. Let's stop mumbling. Don't bury the paschal mystery in homey platitudes or slick rhetoric. Let's not hide the story of Jesus in therapeutic moral deism, which, I think, is the dominant religious voice in our culture. Don't be afraid to let the story of Jesus be what it is and do what it will do: forgiving you, making you a new creation in Christ, reconciling you to God, restoring community and entrusting to you the message of reconciliation.

Get you up. Lift up your voice. Speak the truth. Yes, in a death-denying, death-defying culture of massive deception, speak the truth of our humanity. “[S]urely the people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades” (Isaiah 40:7-8, NRSV).

Lift up your voice. Speak the truth. “[T]he word of our God will stand forever” (Isaiah 40:8, NRSV). But don’t you think too many of us hear that incorrectly. “[T]he word of our God will stand forever.” It’s standing in the corner on a shelf like some religious relic to remind one of the faith of one’s ancestors, ready should I need to pull it off for momentary consolation in a time of crisis. The living word of God incarnate in Jesus Christ proclaimed as law and gospel and recorded in scripture is the enduring, life-giving power of God’s word that stands forever. It is God’s word that is deed, that does what it declares and promises. That word stands forever.

For 156 years, this has been the enduring, living, life-giving word of God that has been and remains the cornerstone of Wartburg Seminary. It is to serve this gospel that this community prepares voices and feet, and for which you, Stan, have been called in leadership.

“How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!” (Romans 10:15, NRSV). A more literal translation of that familiar verse might be this: “How beautifully toned are the feet of the one evangelizing well!” This is not about being passive witnesses, who happen to be, by accident, willing to testify only if asked. This is about being everyday evangelists—all the baptized—living out their vocations in their daily lives, proclaiming the good news of God in Christ through word and deed, serving and striving for justice and peace in all the world. It is about God sending you—commanding you in the voice of the Holy Spirit, “Get you up. Lift up your voice.”

So now for those of you who have come back, what is with the foot, bishop? If you’ve been to my office, you know that this foot sits on the floor next to my desk. Every day as I enter the office it reminds me of Pastor Heidi Neumark’s sermon at my installation as presiding bishop in 2001. When she preached on the Isaiah text of “how beautiful are the feet of those who bring the good news,” Pastor Neumark looked down at me from the pulpit in Rockefeller Chapel. She shook her finger at me and said, “Bishop Hanson, there has been a lot of fussing over who is going to put their hands on your head at this service. Frankly, I don’t care, because tomorrow, I and this church will be watching your feet. Where will you lead this church? Where will you stand?”<sup>1</sup> This was one month after 9-11. Pastor Neumark, a pastor in the South Bronx, asked if my feet would be beautiful enough to stand with them in New York City, where people were reeling with fear and grief. Would I come with this church to stand with those undocumented immigrants who serve the citizens of this land? Would my feet stand with those in poverty and those striving to be generous stewards of their wealth?

So look at your feet. Look at your feet, please. Look at the feet of those around you. Compliment someone saying, “What beautiful feet you have!” [Conversation] Now say, “How beautiful are your feet as you bring good news.” [Conversation] Turn to someone else. Tell them, “Lift up your voice. Your God is here.” What a rehearsal! The recital hall of the world is ready for you. Get you up. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Heidi Neumark, Sermon at the Installation of Mark S. Hanson as Presiding Bishop of the ELCA, 2001. <http://www.elca.org/Our-Faith-In-Action/Justice/Congregation-based-Organizing/article-011011-neumark.aspx>