

Lovett School Graduation
Atlanta, Georgia
May 19, 2013
The Rt. Rev. Rob Wright
Bishop, Episcopal Diocese of Atlanta
Jeremiah 1:4-8

Good afternoon!

I greet you in the name of Ywh the Almighty and Eternal; in the name of Allah, the beneficent and merciful; and in the name I know best, Jesus the Christ. I come among you as a brother and a friend. I bring also the greetings of the Episcopal Diocese of Atlanta: 56,000 people, worshipping in 109 communities, planted all over middle and north Georgia — men, women, children, teenagers and feisty seniors. I want to thank your headmaster, Billy Peebles, Clay Jackson and your Board of Trustees for their kind invitation, to address you this afternoon. This is a real treat for me. I began as an Episcopal School Chaplain in New York City, and so I am thankful to my friends Jennifer and Brian Boutte, and the Rev. Burl Salmon for bringing me back to my ministry beginnings today: the important partnership between faith and education.

I stand here today very grateful to have made the cut as your graduation speaker. I am routinely invited to speak and preach. But in 17 years of that, I have never been asked for a pre-speech interview — until I met the graduating class of 2013. We met via Facetime a couple of weeks ago, and I was very impressed. They were very clear about some themes they wanted me to address and to not address. And so I will honor that. I will not talk about Robert Frost today or the path less traveled. But you did ask me to say something about the real world, about fighting for what you want and about perfection. So let's do that.

The times we live in demand straight talk, especially from God's people, especially from pulpits and especially to our young people. Jeremiah had straight talk on his mind when he sat down at his laptop and wrote out his fears. He wrote that he was just a teenager. And that he felt he was not up to this wonderful future that God was pointing him toward. As he confesses his fears, he starts remembering his faith. He starts remembering God. He hears God say, "Go to the places I send you. Don't be afraid. I am with you."

Those are the most important four words in all of Holy Scripture. I am with you. Jeremiah gives God his four letters, F-E-A-R, and God gives him his four words. God sends Jeremiah into the real world, with all that implies. Disappointments. Setbacks.

Pain. Hard choices. Loss. But God wants Jeremiah to be sure of one thing: I will be with you in the real world.

Young men and young women, esteemed, almost graduates, I would hope you would hear this as you face the next steps in your journey. This is no time to fear! This is a word for us parents as well. Be concerned, yes. Be diligent in planning and preparing, absolutely. But give no time to fear. Fear lowers the ceiling of possibility and brings out our inner tyrants; fear shrinks our hearts and justifies every reason to frustrate the grace of God. I say this to you this afternoon because we hear everywhere, in the real world, that we live in uncertain times. It's all over the news. And, many of us have accepted this as the gospel. Even those of us in the church, the mosque and synagogue; people are fainting for fear all around us. But we do not live in uncertain times — they *are* wrong! All of the analysts, all of the prognosticators, all the pundits are wrong. All of them. We live in difficult times, we live in challenging times, but we don't live in uncertain times.

Our times are not uncertain, because God is certain! Our times are in God's hands. And God is the "...same, yesterday today and forever." The God we love, but are afraid to love too much, neither slumbers nor sleeps. The God that speaks to us and hears our prayers, sits high but looks low. This God values our tears and numbers every hair on our heads — even the hairs that used to be there. This God empowers teenagers to defeat giants with rocks. And this God inspires courage in young ladies such as to save entire nations. (That's a shout out to the book of Esther in case you didn't get it.) And this God will not lose track of you just because your school address is about to change. I call your attention this afternoon to the indescribable, immeasurable love of our God, because it is only "...love that casts out all fear." Thank God that for your years at Lovett; you have been told of the love of this God over and over again in chapel.

Even as I encourage you, I have a confession. I confess to you that my generation has not done a great job living fearlessly. We have preached it better than we have lived it. In fact, we may be the most fearful generation ever. Sure, on the outside we look cute, clever and competent, but take it from me, many of us are desperately afraid. We've just wrapped our fears in Brooks Brothers or Tory Burch. And more than that, too many of us have been successful in passing on our fears to you.

But I have a challenge for the class of 2013, if you're up for a challenge. Reject fear and live fearlessly into the real world! Live fearlessly and redeem us. Live fearlessly and surpass us. Live fearlessly and dream bigger than us. Live fearlessly and fail extravagantly. Live fearlessly and, having failed, get up, and try again valiantly. Live fearlessly and laugh with your whole throat. Live fearlessly and don't be slaves to convention. Live fearlessly and every day by your boldness you will create a more real world.

You asked me to say something about fighting for what you want. And you asked that because you know I am the first African-American bishop in the Episcopal Church in Georgia. To that, I can only say with Mahatma Gandhi, “Be the change you want to see in the world.” You be the change; don’t outsource it! And, recognize that all the things that need to be changed will take time. So don’t lose hope when things don’t go according to your time line. If there is any fight in me, I get it from my faith. From works like the psalms. You know the Psalms, the Jewish Hymnbook? The first rap music ever published? You know, by the very first rap star of the Bible, King David? You know the one? Well before there was a little Wayne there was a little David. He was from the South Side of Israel, Bethlehem, to be specific. David said it this way, “I look to the hills from whence cometh my help, my help is from the Lord.” That’s a glorious image. I see David standing in a deep valley, a young man with towering hills to climb in front of him. And even as those gray hills stared down at him, David does two amazing things: first, he keeps his head up, and then he looks beyond those hills. That’s all I did. You can do it, too.

The textbook definition of faith is “the substance of things hoped for the evidence of things not seen.” You know that. But maybe a more useful definition for all of us – a definition you might take with you into the world – would be faith is keeping your head up even when you’re standing in a valley. Faith is looking beyond the hills that try to intimidate you. Faith is how we understand God’s text messages to us. Faith is how we know God is real, able, good and generous. And by faith is how we walk out of the valleys we find ourselves in. Faith is knowing that there is a gracious Somebody, beyond the cold hills we face. Faith is knowing that evil is real, but it is inferior to love.

One more thing about this faith business: Look at David again. Not only does he have faith, but he’s standing outside. He’s standing outside looking up. Which means, he’s got public faith! As you leave Lovett, young men and young women, please keep your faith public. Take your faith outside of your homes, chapels, and temples, synagogues and mosques. Let the fresh air hit it. Let the sunshine warm it. Faith is not just for your personal preservation. Faith is for global transformation. Let your public faith lead you to the places where only servants go. One important clarification here, public faith is not the same as noisy faith. I see David standing courageously and quietly in faith. Noisy faith argues; public faith serves. Noisy faith divides; public faith includes, Noisy faith tears down; public faith builds up. Remember, beloved, Jesus never said blessed are the obnoxious!

Finally, brothers and sisters, in my interview we talked about perfection. And we agreed that there is no such thing. No perfect school. No perfect life. No perfect faith. But

there is a word that is helpful to us. Completion. We can't be perfect, but we can choose to be evolving toward a more complete and whole school, and life, and faith. Back in the early 1960s the Episcopal Church and Lovett School went through some difficult days. We had some hard conversations about race. And, we went our separate ways. But look now. In those days we could never imagine a day like today. Where we could be together as one family, 145 graduates, in a celebration that transcends division. Evolving toward completion, that's what we're doing. That's what you are doing.

And what is completion? What does the end look like? Do you remember the royal wedding? I wonder, did you see it? What caught your attention? Was it the dress? Was it the hats? Or was it that Snoop Dog was invited to the wedding, but not the former Duchess of York, Sarah Ferguson? What caught my attention was a sentence from the bishop of London's sermon to the happy young couple. He said this: "We shall not be converted to the promise of the future by more knowledge, but rather by an increase of loving wisdom." Not by knowledge but by loving wisdom will we live fully into the future. There it is, that's what I really want to say to you today.

Your minds have been polished to a high gloss shine during your time at Lovett. You have done well here. Exceedingly well. You have been accepted to some of the nation's finest colleges and universities, and we are very proud of you. Now take those minds, our pride in you, your boldness and faith, and excel. Redraw the boundaries of what we know. But do this understanding that the future of our families, faith traditions, our communities, our nation and our world don't depend as much on what you know, as how much you love with all you know! The answers to life won't come ultimately from Silicon Valley, Wall Street or Washington, D.C. That's why when Jesus sent out the young people He had taught, He told them to love. "Love," He said, "as I have loved you." Love always evolves us toward our most glorious completion. It's love that *un-stucks* us. That's what St. Paul means when he says, "Even if I have faith to move mountains, and even if I can parse out all the mysteries and have all knowledge and have not love, I am nothing." That's why Rumi told us: "He was dead then alive; weeping then laughing. Love came into me, he said, and I became fierce like a lion and gentle like an evening star."

And so, wonderful graduates, meet this real world with a still more real faith. And fight your fights remembering to keep you head up even in the valleys. And know that love wants to grow and thrive in you, if you will let it. The rest is up to you. We're here for you. Go for it! AMEN