

St. Mary's was honored to have the Rev. Dr. W. Wilson Goode, Sr. as our preacher on the 15th of December, 2002. For more than forty years, Dr. Goode has been a leader in the military, in government, in the church and in social action and neighborhood organizations. A former mayor of Philadelphia, he received his B.A. in History and Political Science from Morgan State University, his M.A. in Governmental Administration from the Fels Institute of the Wharton School here at the University of Pennsylvania, and his Doctorate of Ministry from the Eastern Baptist Theological Seminary. Dr. Goode is currently the Senior Advisor on Faith-Based Initiatives for Public/Private Ventures, where he also directs the Amachi Program, a faith-based national mentoring program for children of incarcerated parents

***STICKING TO THE AGENDA
ISAIAH 61, PSALM 126, JOHN 1***

In our Gospel this morning John comes to us as a messenger with good news, the Announcement of the coming of Christ Jesus. This was not the first announcement; others had done so, but none with the authority of John. Before he died, Moses declared, "The Lord thy God will raise up unto thee a Prophet from the midst of thee, unto Him ye shall hearken" David declared that the coming of Christ should be "as the light of the morning when the sun riseth, even a morning without clouds." Hosea testified that His going forth is prepared as the morning." Yes, through patriarchs and prophets God spoke to the world of the coming of the Christ child. Indeed, Isaiah declared that there would come forth a Rod out of Jesse, and a Branch shall grow out of His roots. Behold a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call His name Emmanuel. But John was the chief messenger. He was not received with open arms. Listen to words from our reading from the Gospel this morning. Finally they said, "Who are you? Give us an answer to take back to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?"

²³John replied in the words of Isaiah the prophet, "I am the voice of one calling in the desert, `Make straight the way for the Lord¹

In my other life I run called a program called Amachi. This program partners with local churches to mentor children who have one or both parents in jail. There are 2.5 million children in America with one of both parents in jail. The U.S. Senate says that 70% of these children will end up in jail without intervention. That's where the mentoring comes in. I give this info to you really to make another point. There is this wonderful definition of the word Amachi that informs our message this

morning. Amachi means “Who knows but what God has brought us through this child”. Yes, John and others made the announcement, but it was left to Isaiah in our Old Testament reading this morning to set the agenda. The why of His coming is set forth in these wonderful words from Isaiah? This Is His strategic agenda and it is also our agenda.

The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me,
Because the LORD has anointed me
To preach good news to the poor.
He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,
To proclaim freedom for the captives
And release from darkness for the prisoners,
To proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor
And the day of vengeance of our God,
To comfort all who mourn,
And provide for those who grieve in Zion--
To bestow on them a crown of beauty
Instead of ashes,
The oil of gladness
Instead of mourning,
And a garment of praise
Instead of a spirit of despair.

Who knows but God has brought us through this child.

We have suffering all around us. We have injustice all around us. Our children are at risk. AIDS is threatening a whole continent of people. Drugs in this country have caused a 500% increase in the incarceration of African American men and women. Racial profiling places African American men at a disadvantage in the criminal Justice system. Corporate greed has cause thousands to lose their jobs. 15 million children live in poverty and another 14.5 million go to bed hungry every night. 1.5 million wake up in homeless shelters. Millions more children wake up in dens of dope rather Homes of hope. The psalmist asks in Psalm 11.3 “when the foundations are being destroyed, What can the righteous do?” What then is our agenda?

¹Excerpted from *Compton's Interactive Bible NIV*. Copyright (c) 1994, 1995, 1996

- To seek and to save the lost through His Son
- To feed the hungry
- To house the homeless
- To seek justice always
- To gather home those wandering in exile
- To bring an end to oppression
- To bring an end to fear
- To bring light in dark places
- To seek equal education for all children
- To reform the criminal justice system in America
- To seek forgiveness and reconciliation

To end unjust and wrongful imprisonment which is nothing less than slavery in a different form.

So will you today in the spirit of this season seeks to build a faith like that of Abraham and Sarah, of Moses, Rahab, and Joshua? You know that none of these folks wanted to carry out the agenda, but who accepted God's call nonetheless. Moses even asked God to send someone else. But they all did their part to carry out the Agenda.

We must accept the call of God on our lives. We are the keepers of His message. We are the ones who must tell this story over and over again. We must tell it clearly. We must know the story well. We must know the agenda and we must stick to it. Oh there will be those who will question the agenda but we must stick to it. There will be those that will say the agenda must change with the times, but we must stick to it. They will call it old fashion and outdated. But what God brought us through this Child JESUS is as real to day as it was 2000 years ago.

- To preach good news to the poor
- To heal the brokenhearted
- To announce freedom to all captives
- Pardon all prisoners
- Comfort those who mourn

But what God brought us through this Child Jesus is a sense of our own responsibility, our own obligation to carry out His agenda.

So we must proclaim good news.

We must forgive those who are indebted to us

We must help feed those who are hungry

We must help house those who are homeless

We must advocate for justice

We must seek a fairer and just criminal justice system

We must join with the prophet Isaiah and say:

Woe to those who make unjust laws,

To those who issue oppressive decrees,

²To deprive the poor of their rights

And withhold justice from the oppressed of my people,

Making widows their prey

And robbing the fatherless.

Too many have turned our faith into a blessing factory.

Too many want blessings without burdens. Too many want results without responsibility.

Too many want power without struggle.

We must stand on the wall as the defender of all that is right and just.

We must stick to the agenda and if we do so God has a blessing for us.

In our Psalm this morning the psalmist reminds us anew of the joy that will come in our lives if we stick to the agenda.

He who goes out weeping,

Carrying seed for sowing,

Shall come home with shouts of joy,

Carrying sheaves with him.

²Our mouths were filled with laughter,

Our tongues with shouts of joy.

Then it was said among the nations,
"The LORD has done great things for them."

³The LORD has done great things for us,
And we are filled with joy.

We can be assured of the blessings that will come if we place our hope in Him. My ancestors who were in slavery knew something about hope and the Lord restoring. They expressed their hope in songs. "Nobody knows the trouble I see, but glory Hallelujah". "I've been bucked and I've been scorned, but ain't going to lay my religion down". "Been in the storm too long, but Hallelujah the storm is passing over. But they not only sang they worked. During slavery they formed the Underground Railroad. And those that God had blessed to gained freedom went back to the plantation and at great risk to themselves they brought others to freedom. They understood Jesus' agenda and they expressed their hope in songs and their faith in action. We must do no less. And indeed we are challenged to do so.

We must build ancient ruins.

We must raise up former devastations.

We must repair our cities and our neighborhoods.

Well I could go on for some times, but I must bring this to an end.

It is now all in our hands. We are his instruments. We have a great message. We have the agenda. The Holy Spirit will make this message come alive within us. The agenda must become real to us.

My dear friend Dr. Maurice C. Clifford whose life we celebrated yesterday exemplified this spirit in a prayer he wrote about two years ago. He asked God to: infuse my soul with your creative spirit, so that every thought and act bestows on all whose lives touch mine an offering of love and peace and joy.

In ten days as we gather in our homes to celebrate what God has brought us through His Son, let us remember the agenda and let those whose lives we touch know the love, the hope, and the joy that He brought to the world. Because we know that because He came one day every mountain will be brought low, every valley will be raised up, every crooked place made straight and every rough place made plain.

Until that happens we must stick to the agenda and follow Paul's instructions as set forth in our Epistle this morning

Rejoice always

Pray without ceasing

Give thanks in all circumstances.