Truth on the Scaffold: Living Toward Ecologies of Hope

University of Evansville, Neu Chapel 163rd Founder's Day

February 19, 2017 Romans 12:1-8, Philip Amerson

Greeting: President Kazee, Bishop Trimbe, Dr. Giesleman, administrators, members of the faculty, especially Dr. Thomas Josenhans and emeriti faculty recognized today, distinguished alumni/ae, and assembled friends,

Introduction:

I stopped by today to wish you a happy 163^{rd} Birthday. You look great for your age! From 1854 when Moores Hill Collegiate Institute was conceived in southeastern Indiana, to Evansville College arriving here in 1919, this institution has advanced in remarkable ways. I am particularly honored to offer the Edgar M. McKown lecture today.

Preparing for today brought reminders of the strength and vitality of this university. I reflected on the exceptional faculty scholarship, the outstanding careers of alumni/ae and your international reach. I thought of lecture halls and campus activities from which radiate a persistent commitment to preparing citizens who honor the highest values in human relationships. All of this, does indeed, exemplify your core purpose to "provide students with life transforming educational experiences that prepare them to engage the world as informed, ethical, and productive citizens."ii

I consider the beautiful city of Evansville one of my hometowns.ⁱⁱⁱ Forty (40) years ago, this city was my "post-graduate-school" laboratory. Elaine and I continue to be blessed with an abundance of friendships first forged in ebb and flow of life here. We arrived in the summer of 1977. Jimmy Carter was the president and Russell Lloyd was our mayor. Here I was mentored and loved, challenged and critiqued, and I matured as a pastor, teacher, researcher, community builder and administrator.

Yes, this was home on December 13, 1977. I recall the heartbreaking events surrounding the crash of Air Indiana, flight 216. The depth of grief experienced and the loss of those twenty-nine lives was and remains profound. I recall the tears shed on campus and walking downtown hearing persons sobbing in public. It lingers. Even now my heart aches. We can do no better today than remember the words of President Graves at the time who said, "Out of the agony of this hour we shall rise."

Over and again, this school has risen and lived out the words of James Russell Lowell: New occasions teach new duties; Time makes ancient good uncouth. They must upward still, and onward, who would keep abreast of Truth.

I. New Occasions Teach New Duties

New occasions teach new duties. The phrase: "may you live in interesting times" has been identified as an ancient Chinese curse. Actually, scholars tell us this is apocryphal; even as it captures a thread of Chinese culture which suggests a blessing may also be a curse. I think it is fair to say we today are "living in interesting times." [I want to step away from the written text and express my gratitude to both President Kazee and Bishop Trimble for their important, separate statements that welcome the immigrant to our shores.

I join them in encouraging our nation to express hospitality to the refugee and to live in with respect for persons of various ethnicities, religions and geographical backgrounds.]

Now, I want to begin our thinking with a few observations drawn from the history of this institution.

Did you know that the first graduate in 1858 was a woman? In reviewing historical documents, I saw her photo, Mrs. Jane Churchill Kahler, "the first graduate of Moores Hill College". [Other documents confirm Mrs. Kahler was the first graduate of Moores Hill. [Vi] I confess to having been somewhat surprised. 1858? Not many women were enrolled in colleges at the time. Then I remembered Moores Hill was established as a co-educational school. **New occasions, new duties!**

Did you know that Moores Hill was a place of hospitality and encouragement for abolitionists? Classes had to be suspended for a time early in the Civil War because the college president, Samuel R. Adams, and a majority of the male students left their studies to join the Union Army. **New occasions, new duties!**

Did you know that in 1917, one hundred years ago next month, in a time of great xenophobia and suspicion of German Americans, the decision was made to move to Evansville? Evansville was a culturally diverse city with a large German-American citizenry. So, when on March 21, 1917, George S. Clifford spoke to Indiana Methodists at Roberts Park Church in Indianapolis, he was well-aware of the anti-German sentiments in our state. Clifford distributed a map showing a 50-mile radius around the city. He noted no other college was in this circle; and, said the area had a population of 609,000. This, he argued, was sufficient to support three average colleges at that time. Vii (I have done a little arithmetic and think Mr. Clifford might have included some cows in his population count.)

Sixteen days before Mr. Clifford's presentation, Woodrow Wilson was inaugurated for his second term as president. Increasingly it was clear the United States would end its isolationism and soon enter World War I. On March 15th Tsar Nicholas II abdicated the Russian throne. The world was in turmoil and fear of the immigrant was high.

The story of the decision to move the college to Evansville found in the *Indianapolis News*, March 22, is nested on page 13 among advertisements for suits with long trousers, Walker shoes at 3\$ up to \$8 a pair, and the new chainless Packard delivery truck.^{ix} The newspaper that day was filled with stories of alien spies hidden among the nine million German-born citizens in the U.S. There was a story about large and growing number of young men, German immigrants, leaving the U.S. and heading for -- (wait for it) – **Mexico**.

Indiana Historian James H. Madison and Lee Ann Sandweiss in a recent work *Hoosiers and the American Story*, write "In 1915 in Vanderburgh County, the grandchildren of immigrants who had come before the Civil War were still confirmed in church services conducted in German. One woman recalled, 'if you weren't confirmed in German, you weren't confirmed. God didn't listen to you in the English language.' German-language newspapers, schools, beer gardens, and social clubs all helped preserve the homeland culture and make newly-arrived Germans feel at home."^x

It was in this social and political ecology Evansville College opened two years later on fifty acres with money pledged from the City of Evansville and the Indiana Methodists. **New occasions teach new duties.**

II. Our Current New Occasions

What are the "new occasions" faced today? There seem so many from which to choose: perhaps, the troubled lives of our youth in Indiana with rates of teenage suicide and depression among the highest in the nation? Or, might it be the opioid abuse crisis devastating so many of our communities? Or, might we look to the frenzied, frenetic flow of events in our nation where each day seems to be filled with another blur of bombast with little regard for civility or well-reasoned public policy?

Each of these seems a critical new occasion. However, I want to turn our attention to another concern – the natural environmental crises before us. xi Crossing into this territory, in this Evansville clustered as she is amid coal-fired power plants, is a precarious topic I know. Speaking about this where more that six thousand jobs are tied to the mining industry is a risk. Still, let's be honest, if one uses Mr. Clifford's map from 1917 and draws that fifty-mile radius around this campus one finds one of the highest concentrations of toxic super polluting power plants in the nation. The region has all the right ingredients – ample water, mining and an industrious labor force.

I suspect most of you have read a news story or two related to the millions of pounds of toxic air-pollution produced within the circle each year. There are more coal-fired power plants around Evansville than around any other large or midsized city in the nation. Of the twenty-one plants identified as super polluters in the United States, four of them in this circle. There are five super polluting plants in Indiana and four of them are in Mr. Clifford's circle.) Dr. Stephen Jay of IUPUI's School of Public Health notes "In Indiana industrial greenhouse-gas emissions are second only to Texas domestically, and exceed those from Israel, Greece and 185 other countries."xiv

Perhaps you have seen the video about our situation on the Weather Channel.^{xv} In September, *The Louisville Courier Journal* noted that Indiana fourth in toxic air emissions and made the shocking point that while Kentucky had reduced harmful emissions by 33% in the last decade, Indiana had reduced these by only 1%.^{xvi} A short time ago, in 2004 Indiana was a leader in the development of wind energy and seemed ready to show the way for others in developing renewable energy sources. Things changed. Indiana is now one of 27 states suing the EPA to block implementation of a clean power plan.

Emissions from coal burning plants are not good for our health and they bring rapidly increasing destruction for our planet. A growing number of studies demonstrate this. Such pollution is correlated with higher incidences of heart disease, pulmonary problems and certain cancers. Way back in 1979, in an article for *Sojourners Magazine*, I quoted the Spencer County coroner who seeing the increasing incidence of serious health problems and death said, "If the people knew the truth, they'd panic." Long time local activist and photographer John Blair puts it simply, "we're subsidizing the coal industry big time with our health." viii

Our former governor, as a climate-change skeptic, worked aggressively against healthier energy alternatives. As governor, he bragged that we were a "proud pro-coal state" where 75% of our energy comes from such power plants and said that any shift to cleaner energy was simply **too expensive**. **He has now become Vice President of the United States. On Friday, two days ago, Mr. Scott Pruitt was confirmed as head of the EPA. If anything, Mr. Pruitt, from Oklahoma, holds views that are even more hostile to addressing these dilemmas than are Mr. Pence's views. It is in this new occasion we must be teaching new duties. Creative, life-affirming responses are needed.

James Russell Lowell's poem spoke of times when "Truth was on the scaffold." Today is such a time – regarding our environment – and so many other issues of morality, human respect and basic governance. xx

III. How then shall we live in 2017?

Several years ago, I discovered a piece of wisdom from the Dakota Sioux Nation. Passed on from generation to generation, it is simply this: When you discover you are riding a dead horse, the best strategy, the first thing to do, is dismount!

I have been told that our new U. S. Senator, Todd Young, is an honorable man. I pray so. And I hope that the men from Indiana's 8th and 9th congressional districts, Larry Bucshon and Trey Hollingsworth, your representative and mine, are reasonable persons of some moral character. Still, these men seem trapped by the money, and political power of monopolies, and operate too often within ideological cul-de-sacs. 78% of registered voters in the nation support taxing and regulating carbon emissions. This two weeks ago prominent Republicans like James Baker III, George Shultz and Henry Paulson Jr. courageously endorsed a carbon tax plan. This new occasion requires voices of courage, reason, compassion and faith to speak out. We need to call on our representatives, including Democratic Senator Donnelly, to dismount from the dead horses they have been riding. We need representatives more focused on the wellbeing of the next generation and not so concerned about the next election... or visit from powerful lobbyists!

Nor should we be silent about our faith communities, churches, synagogues and mosques. Some few address this concern, but ever so feebly. Pope Francis gave the world a marvelous gift with the encyclical entitled *Laudato Si*. This powerful document on the care of our creation, our common home, needs to be read and studied by communities of faith everywhere. And, it will take more than changing to more efficient lightbulbs!

Sadly, my own beloved Indiana Conference of the United Methodist Church shows little interest in creation care or the health crises faced by folks in this region. It is embarrassing. Our *Social Principles* are clear. The section on *The Natural World* begins with these words: "All creation is the Lord's and we are responsible for the ways we use and abuse it.xxiii" In 2009 the Council of UM bishops issued a pastoral letter on "social and environmental holiness." Despite pledges made by the bishops in this letter, one searches the Indiana Conference website in vain for any information or resources regarding *social and environmental holiness*. Workshops on creation care offered just a few short years ago have disappeared entirely from our conference agenda.

Instead, we keep fighting foolish battles and wasting scarce resources on an ecclesial ecology of anxiety, exclusion and despair. How about your faith group? We Methodists seem unable to move beyond the fallacious division made between pastoral and prophetic ministry. For its time and place, it was a wholegospel-Methodists approach that established Moores Hill Institute or made quality higher education available in Evansville. It is time for my church to dismount. As Father Richard Rohr suggests, *Yearning for a new way will not produce it. Only ending the old way can do that*.

Maverick social philosopher and Roman Catholic priest Ivan Illich was once asked, "Given what you suggest about institutions, what is the best way to make change, violent revolution or gradual reform?" Illich replied, "Neither, the best way to bring change is to give an alternative story."xxv

Well, in the last three minutes I have broken the rule that "one is not to speak of religion or politics in polite society." Having gone this far, [administrators, brace yourselves], I want to ask what will be the alternative story offered by this university? Might this school offer even more ecologies of hope? I have looked at the

school's curriculum. Impressive. This university appears to do pretty well regarding basic environmental studies. Well done! Kudoos! Keep at it. Do more! And I know to leave the prerogatives regarding curriculum with the faculty and the deans where they belong. Still, it is precisely because this school is so well positioned with strengths evident in the sciences, health care, engineering and the humanities – and because you are located in this particular geographic setting and yet with a global reach – that I would challenge you for even more imagination and the provision of an abundance of alternative stories. **New occasions teach new duties.**

In my former roll as a seminary president, a retired pastor came to my office one day proposing that every student in our school should be required to take a course in ballroom dancing. [Actually, such proposals came several times in my tenure. I suspect President Kazee and Vice President Austin have had similar experiences.] Relax, I have no specific curriculum like ballroom dancing to suggest – I just refer you to your own fine history and the resources currently available.

IV. An Ecology of Hope

So, with truth on the scaffold, where do we find hope? Most of the world's great religions can provide us some helpful and hopeful ecological material. In Romans 12, the apostle Paul writes about what I consider to be an ecology of hope: Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. [I pause to note that remarkably fitting for today, some ancient authorities read the words "serve the Lord" as serve the opportune time.] Paul continues: Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer.

I am hopeful for this great institution. I am hopeful for the church. I am even hopeful for the political ecology of this nation. And if you need some new perspective on this find the marvelous little book by Rebecca Solnit, *Hope in the Dark: Untold Histories, Wild Possibilities*. **xxvi** Read it.

And, then there is farmer, novelist, poet, environmental activist and cultural critic Wendell Berry. He penned this brief poem that nurtures my spirit:

The seed is in the ground.

Now may we rest in hope

While darkness does its work.

Another Environmentalist, entrepreneur and author Paul Hawken, gave a surprisingly hope-filled address at the University of Portland. It was titled *You are Brilliant, and the Earth is Hiring*. "When asked, he says, "if I am pessimistic or optimistic about the future, my answer is always the same: If you look at the science about what is happening on earth and aren't pessimistic, you don't understand the data. But if you meet the people who are working to restore this earth and the lives of the poor, and you aren't optimistic, you haven't got a pulse... Inspiration is not garnered from the litanies of what may befall us; it resides in humanity's willingness to restore, redress, reform, rebuild, recover, re-imagine, and reconsider."xxviii

New occasions indeed teach new duties.

AMEN.

James Russell Lowell's poem, *The Present Crises*^{xxix} -- Written in 1844, this poem provided inspiration for the leaders of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. When deciding on a name for their new publication in 1910 they agreed that the name of their magazine should be *The Crisis*.

Once to every man and nation comes the moment to decide, In the strife of Truth with Falsehood, for the good or evil side; Some great cause, God's new Messiah, offering each the bloom or blight, Parts the goats upon the left hand, and the sheep upon the right, And the choice goes by forever 'twixt that darkness and that light.

Hast thou chosen, O my people, on whose party thou shalt stand, Ere the Doom from its worn sandals shakes the dust against our land? Though the cause of Evil prosper, yet 't is Truth alone is strong, And, albeit she wander outcast now, I see around her throng Troops of beautiful, tall angels, to enshield her from all wrong.

Backward look across the ages and the beacon-moments see, That, like peaks of some sunk continent, jut through Oblivion's sea; Not an ear in court or market for the low, foreboding cry Of those Crises, God's stern winnowers, from whose feet earth's chaff mus Never shows the choice momentous till the judgment hath passed by.

Careless seems the great Avenger; history's pages but record One death-grapple in the darkness 'twixt old systems and the Word; Truth forever on the scaffold, Wrong forever on the throne,—Yet that scaffold sways the future, and, behind the dim unknown, Standeth God within the shadow, keeping watch above his own.

We see dimly in the Present what is small and what is great, Slow of faith how weak an arm may turn the iron helm of fate, But the soul is still oracular; amid the market's din, List the ominous stern whisper from the Delphic cave within,— "They enslave their children's children who make compromise with sin."

Slavery, the earth-born Cyclops, fellest of the giant brood, Sons of brutish Force and Darkness, who have drenched the earth with blo Famished in his self-made desert, blinded by our purer day, Gropes in yet unblasted regions for his miserable prey;— Shall we guide his gory fingers where our helpless children play?

Then to side with Truth is noble when we share her wretched crust, Ere her cause bring fame and profit, and 't is prosperous to be just; Then it is the brave man chooses, while the coward stands aside, Doubting in his abject spirit, till his Lord is crucified, And the multitude make virtue of the faith they had denied.

Count me o'er earth's chosen heroes,—they were souls that stood alone, While the men they agonized for hurled the contumelious stone, Stood serene, and down the future saw the golden beam incline To the side of perfect justice, mastered by their faith divine, By one man's plain truth to manhood and to God's supreme design.

By the light of burning heretics Christ's bleeding feet I track,
Toiling up new Calvaries ever with the cross that turns not back,
And these mounts of anguish number how each generation learned
One new word of that grand *Credo* which in prophet-hearts hath burned
Since the first man stood God-conquered with his face to heaven upturned

For Humanity sweeps onward: where to-day the martyr stands, On the morrow crouches Judas with the silver in his hands; Far in front the cross stands ready and the crackling fagots burn, While the hooting mob of yesterday in silent awe return To glean up the scattered ashes into History's golden urn.

'T is as easy to be heroes as to sit the idle slaves
Of a legendary virtue carved upon our fathers' graves,
Worshippers of light ancestral make the present light a crime;—
Was the Mayflower launched by cowards, steered by men behind their tim
Turn those tracks toward Past or Future, that made Plymouth Rock sublim

They were men of present valor, stalwart old iconoclasts, Unconvinced by axe or gibbet that all virtue was the Past's; But we make their truth our falsehood, thinking that hath made us free, Hoarding it in mouldy parchments, while our tender spirits flee The rude grasp of that great Impulse which drove them across the sea.

They have rights who dare maintain them; we are traitors to our sires, Smothering in their holy ashes Freedom's new-lit altar-fires; Shall we make their creed our jailer? Shall we, in our haste to slay, From the tombs of the old prophets steal the funeral lamps away To light up the martyr-fagots round the prophets of to-day?

New occasions teach new duties; Time makes ancient good uncouth; They must upward still, and onward, who would keep abreast of Truth; Lo, before us gleam her camp-fires! we ourselves must Pilgrims be, Launch our Mayflower, and steer boldly through the desperate winter sea, Nor attempt the Future's portal with the Past's blood-rusted key.

ENDNOTES

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¹ As a Methodist preacher's kid from Southern Indiana, I knew of Dean McKown's work and his commitment to excellence in education and quality teaching. He was also responsible for Ministerial Qualifications and Training at the time I was approved for ordination in the former South Indiana Annual Conference.

ii Core Purpose statement, see UE website https://www.evansville.edu/aboutue/mission.cfm.

iii Amerson, Philip, "The Surprising Neighbor," 156th Founder's Day Address, Evansville University, February 14, 2007 included the following passages: Here, along the banks of the Ohio River, I was privileged to know priests, rabbis and pastors from a wide

range of theological perspectives. We built a wide ecumenical and interfaith network. It was here I was privileged to know, and work with, mayors and civic leaders like Russ Lloyd, Mike Vandeveer, Sol and Alberta Stephenson, Sara Davies, Jim Landers and Randy Sheppard. Perhaps I am overly nostalgic, but as I witness the shenanigans in our nation today, my memory of 1970s and 1980s Evansville, is that while we had our battles as Democrat and Republican, there was a deeper bond, a commitment to community and nation that transcended the skirmishes of party and ideology. It was here I witnessed the strength and resources of an African American community still struggling with the realities of segregation and discrimination. It was here I learned from friends at the Labor Temple and the Petroleum Club. Here there were friends in the courtroom and the jailhouse. It was here I saw good people (and some not-so-noble-rascals) struggle to find appropriate solutions to vexing problems.

Here I saw strikes that lasted too long, industrial plants as they closed, neighborhoods divested of resources, new suburbs as they mushroomed and often, there were city council and school board meetings that would stretch on into the middle of the night... I remember so much more -- news anchor David James announcing the election of Bob Orr as governor in 1980s followed by weather woman, Marsha Yockey, in the fullness of all her idiosyncratic silliness. If we had a couple of days I could tell you of friends in the faculty and administrators at this university. Friends who helped me think about politics, faith, community, science and ethics. I would tell of neighborhood folks, poor in material things but rich in soul. I would tell of long lunches with my rabbi friend, or those Presbyterian, Baptist, Roman Catholic and UCC clergy colleagues. Of course, I was especially fortunate to call one Lutheran pastor of a core city congregation my dear friend. His tiny brick church was just down the street from where we lived. I would meet with Walt Wangerin, Jr. on most Thursday afternoons in his small study. Together we would pray and plot, make confession and offer reconciliation, laugh and cry -- pretty good stuff for a Lutheran and Methodist in the 1970s and '80s.

- iv Lowell, James Russell, *The Present Crises*, See https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/present-crisis, The American Academy of Poets, 75 Maiden Lane, Suite 901, New York.
- ^v The Melange: Class of Ninety-four, Moores Hill College, Cincinnati: Cranston and Curts, 1894, p. 39.
- vi Bigney, A. J., President, Moores Hill College, Annual Report of the Department of Public Instruction of the State of Indiana, Fort Wayne Printing Company, 1917, p. 171.
- vii The Indianapolis News, "Conference Considers College Removal Plan: Methodists Hear Offers Regarding Moores Hill. Evansville Favored as Site, March 22, 1917, p.13.
- viii Englund, Will, March 1917: On the Brink of War and Revolution, New York: W. W. Norton Co. forthcoming, 2017.
- ix Op Cit. The Indianapolis News, March 22, 1917.
- ^x Madison, James H. and Lee Ann Sandweiss, *Hoosiers and the American Story*, Indiana Historical Society Press, 2014, p.144.
- xi Hopkins, Jamie Smith, Center for Public Integrity, "Meet America's super polluters". USA Today, September 29, 2016. http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/2016/09/29/toxic-air-pollution-concentrated-small-number-sites/90846584/
- xii Hopkins, Jamie Smith, "Americas super polluters, Ohio Citizen Action, October 3, 2016, http://ohiocitizen.org/americas-super-polluters/
- xiii Ibid.
- xiv Jay, Stephen, School of Public Health at IUPUI, https://pbhealth.iupui.edu/index.php/news/school-news/dr-jay-speaks-about-america-s-super-polluters/
- xv Super Polluters: A Documentary from the Weather Channel. Weather Channel "Super Polluters are in Southwest Indiana, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2dr05PfQl2E
- xvi Bruggers, James, "*Kentucky, Indiana home to top 'super polluters*." Louisville Courier-Journal, September 26, 2016. http://www.courier-journal.com/story/tech/science/environment/2016/09/26/kentucky-indiana-home-top-super-polluters/87950252/
- xvii Amerson, Philip, "If the People Knew the Truth They'd Panic," Sojourners Magazine, Vol. 8, No. 1, January 1979, 11-13. xviii Hopkins, Jamie Smith, Center for Public Integrity, "Meet America's super polluters". USA Today, September 29, 2016. http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/2016/09/29/toxic-air-pollution-concentrated-small-number-sites/90846584/
- xix Hopkins, Jamie Smith, Center for Public Integrity, "Meet America's super polluters". USA Today, September 29, 2016. http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/2016/09/29/toxic-air-pollution-concentrated-small-number-sites/90846584/
- xx My suspicion is that these crises (youth depression and suicide, opioid abuse, poor public policy and environmental degradation are all interrelated. Today I am simply seeking to identify one of the places where responsible citizens need to begin to act.
- xxi Editorial Board, *The New York Times*, February 13, 2017, mobile.nytimes.com/2017/02/13/opinion/a-rare-republican-call-to-climate-action.html
- xxii Feldstein, Martin, Ted Halstead and N. Gregory Mankiw, "*A Conservative Case for Climate Action*," February 8, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/08/opinion/a-conservative-case-for-climate-action.html?_r=0

xxiii From The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church - 2016. *Social Principles: Our Natural World*, The United Methodist Publishing House.

xxiv Council of Bishops of the United Methodist Church, *God's Renewed Creation: Call to Hope and Action* (Pastoral Letter), 2009.

xxv Cayley, David, The Rivers North of the Future, Toronto: Anansi Press, 2005.

xxvi Solnit, Rebecca, *Hope in the Dark: Untold Histories, Wild Possibilities*, Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2016.

xxvii Hawken, Paul, *You are Brilliant and the Earth is Hiring,* Commencement Address, University of Portland, 2009. xxviii *Ibid.*

xxix Lowell, James Russell, loc cit.