

Brothers and sisters, good evening. I would like to thank Bishop Park for this opportunity. I would also like to thank Gregory Cherry and his mother, The Rev. Natalia Cherry, who you will see in just a few minutes.

And now, from Ephesians Chapter 3: “Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine. To him be glory in the church, and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever, amen.”

Tonight we give God the praise, for whenever we worship God is our celebration. Whenever we come with joyful hearts for what God has done in ministry, we come with hopeful hearts for what God will do in ministry. God is at work in fruitful congregations, through effective leadership, and lay empowerment. From northeast Pennsylvania, also known as Neapa, from the Scranton Wilkes-Barre District, people of God are empowered to, and engaged in their surrounding communities with an initiative called God has left the building, I’m sorry, the church has left the building. That’s not a cue to leave.

Eleven churches, including Hawley, Lakeville, Friends in Faith, Common Thread UMCs, among other denominations, partnered together over twenty-eight service sites. Mostly lay volunteers in acts of service in a one-day blitz. Did it make a difference? It sure did. People in the community wanted to know more about Jesus. People in the community joined the church, giving this social act of hope holiness, this act of social holiness as their reason. Praise be to God.

My brother, Mack Granderson, pastors the busy Derry Street United Methodist Church in the Heart of the Allison Hill Community in Harrisburg. More people are worshiping there with bilingual fellowship, food, and clothing ministries, several support groups, and after-school tutoring, praise be to God.

In Muncy at First UMC, they are celebrating ministry and life in Jesus Christ as they are seeing a new addition go up around them, but that’s not enough to have a new building. After a small group reads one of my favorite books, “The Externally Focused Church,” they have made an amazing connection with area schools, lifting up Muncy school teachers, bringing them coffee, snacks, along with their encouragement.

We heard this morning about Ryan Gephart and his congregation, Christ United Methodist Church in Selinsgrove, that God is celebrated even through trials and tribulations as their church was consumed by fire. But they gave witness right here in front of all of us, saying how much they have been blessed by the outpouring and the blessing from the community back to them, praise be to God. Only by God’s power at work within us can we give witness to such holy abundance, extending the gospel far more than we could ask or imagine.

From Ephesians, these are words of encouragement. They are not only inspiring they are also a spiritual magnet that draws our focus back to the source, our Creator God.

Paul is writing friends in Ephesus about the crisp, clean line of discipleship, life in Jesus Christ. And in the middle of his correspondence he has to stop right where he is to go back to the source.

And he says now to him, now to all our God, who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than we can ask or imagine.

My heart also tells me to share through these words a message of caution. For there are times we think we can somehow get to the far more on our own. I confess that I do forget, and I am pulled away from the source, my Creator God.

There are times when I look at last week's calendar page or at last week's page in my planner. And looking at the days filled with scribbles and appointments, I catch myself pondering all the things *I've* done. Forgive me, God. I can do nothing without the power of the Holy Spirit at work within me. We can do nothing without the power of the Holy Spirit at work within us. To take it one step further, without each other, we are not as good as when we are working together in God's Spirit.

In the Marvel Comic-inspired movies, "The Avengers," each good guy hero possess a super power. Iron Man, Captain America, Thor of Asgard, Hawkeye, and the Incredible Hulk. The Black Widow came later. Each are so strong as individual heroes who are called to save the world, but it is halfway through the movie that they finally realize that their gifts are much more effective when they work together. The good guys as individuals are so determined to save the world on their own, that they are resistant, actually resistant, to the strength of someone else. Are we so focused on our own skill set that we resist the power of God in someone else? We don't have long, church.

We no longer, we can no longer wait fifteen years, as the bishop mentioned yesterday, and then kick it in with urgency. The time of urgency is now. This real life adventure could end at any time. We've got to get together in honoring God through our ministry, using the power at work within us.

Sure, we're not The Avengers. But maybe we could take up an old name tonight. "The Evangles." That's right. The Evangles are those who bring good news. The old name before there was a network, there was the evangelism of our hearts as God's people together. Before there was a denomination with such a name we were The Evangles, and we are. The church was and is made up of those who believe and share the gospel of Jesus. Those who believe and go therefore and make disciples for the transformation of the world, period. Evangles.

Our purpose is not to save the world; our purpose is to tell others about the one who rescues us. And most importantly, rescues us from ourselves. Mostly saves ourselves from not following the crisp, clean line of discipleship.

The Avengers are not the only ones with good guy characteristics, for the good guy characteristics are among us. There are those in the room right now and maybe watching someplace else who are prayerfully discerning a call to ministry. In various stages some will be certified, licensed, commissioned, ordained. I say to you, be encouraged that God calls you. That God is calling you. For God has the gifts of others to lead God's people.

God is always calling forth the spiritual gifts needed to lead God's people. May the church pray for the newly called. And for those who have yet to answer that call. It should be always a prayer in our hearts, our congregations praying for those to come to serve the church, to serve Jesus Christ.

Iron Man is an ordinary guy who by innovation creates a suit of power. Now the saving message of Jesus Christ will always be the same. But may the church be innovative and welcoming to new ways of sharing the gospel as new spiritual gifts. The newly called are coming into the local church. We are a people of an innovative and creative God, who calls new servants for future generations.

Speaking of serving generations, the folks right down front are those who are seasoned among us, the retirees. All of you know full well and can testify to what God has accomplished through your lives, through your ministries. Like Captain America, you've been here. I'm not going to say how long. You've been here, and you've been true to serving others in the name of Jesus. We thank you for your service to God and to the people of this annual conference. You have long carried the shield of faith and the rest of the full armor of God. As we praise God for ministry and celebrate this night with you, may you guide us and remind us of the far more God has to accomplish in us. May you lead us and remind us of what God can accomplish.

Thor and his mighty hammer hails from a whole other place called Asgard. We praise God for those pastors serving from a whole different place beyond the church doors. Elders, deacons, chaplains, and many afield, non-profit ministers, teachers of higher learning, administrators of the greater church. Many of you can witness to the far more of God's holy movement in your ministries as you boldly live and tell the good news extending to many places. Those from many places of ministry, thank you, and welcome home.

A word to the clergy sisters and brothers, as we see Hawkeye, the great archer, with pinpoint accuracy. While we may be dutiful to God, our prayer life stellar, relying on the strength of God guiding ourselves and our people along that crisp, clean line of discipleship, we sometimes after all that, holding it all together in ourselves, the danger of being a Lone Ranger, we sometimes don't give much thought to reaching out to each other, accepting help from another. So I would like to recognize The Reverend Jason Mackey as a contributor to this evening's message. Two are better than one. Jason, you shot an arrow my way, and the Holy Spirit provided a bow and a quiver to send it out. I thank you.

There is one more good guy characteristic to share. And it is one that is special to me. Actually, it's quite Incredible. You see, it shaped my life to the point of bringing me to these steps in 1996, where the Holy Spirit moved me to discern a life of service to Christ and the church.

I grew up in a Christian home, a very faithful Christian home. My father, now deceased, was a pastor of this annual conference. And he would be retiring about now. He was one of the good guys; well, there's a lot of good guys. My parents were very faithful in guiding me; my spiritual guides. But it was the laity of the church who empowered my life in Jesus Christ. I want you to hear this, all those blue tags out there. It was the laity of the church who empowered my life. Being a preacher's kid, it was the laity of the church who empowered my life in Jesus Christ.

Every great revival of the church was caused when the people of God got down on their knees, clergy and laity, and they prayed to God to get back to the source for the power of God to lead them. Not that they would smash through with their own abundance or their own arrogance or their own will of self-accomplishment, but that they would see the power at work within themselves and the power of work within each other, that they could build the kingdom of God together.

There is good news to tell. Evangelists, believers of the good news. We just don't get to believe it, we must share it in the name of the one who rescues us, in the name of the one who calls us to be unified, in the name of the one who can do and accomplish abundantly far more. Amen.