

Dear Bishop and very dear Pastor Yoost!  
Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,  
Dear Congregation,  
Dear guests,  
Ladies and gentlemen,

Thanks for the invitation to this 275 years celebration of the founding of the Lutheran congregation here in Savannah. For me it is a great honor to be here, and even more that you have invited me to be your key-note speaker today. Especially - because of the fact that a part of my family is not entirely innocent of having a Lutheran church and as well as a well-living church here in this beautiful place in Georgia.

On this great occasion, I would like to philosophize today a little bit in my speech, about the Church, about the past, as well as about the future.

I would not like just to reflect but also to ask questions.

I think, having such an event, you should not only look back into the past. Looking at things that had already happened long time ago or looking at what is at the moment – like this festival - but forward as well to the things of the near future which is certainly always the hardest part.

Our future - what will happen once; what comes up next - one can never know, one can only guess and ask.

Remembering the year 1517 one had asked questions – and of course Martin Luther's 95 Theses should indeed cause no schism, but trigger a scientific discussion.

Therefore - I hope when I am raising things up - I do not get too deep into the footsteps of my great-ancestor; not to have 2 parishes here in "Ascension" - after the end of my speech.

275 years - this is not to overlook in a single human life.

Such period covers about 10 generations of human coexistence, which one can hardly overlook. Because if we are honest to ourselves; we sometimes can hardly gather the last few years in their entire context. The past years that lay just behind us.

How much more difficult is it to survey 275 years.

If you have ever looked back at the last, you may say 10 or 20 years; then you realize that in this short time a lot has changed in your life and mine as well.

During this time, some of you might have become parents or are perhaps now happy grandparents. Some may have lost and buried a loved one during this period.

Others have married or divorced - because living together, no longer worked in everyday life. Children have matured in this period to adulthood and have established their own families. Maybe moved away from home, to work or study in different places.

And all these had happened only in the last 10 or 20 years.

There have been countless encounters, rotary and turning points, events, highlights in your life; where even "you" yourself have changed.

And hopefully you had in this most diverse time, whether heavy or good hours of your life, other people at your side - perhaps from this congregation, a member of your family, maybe pastors or counselors, but for sure a friend.

One thing has not changed since the dawn of mankind: every society, social group, community, family and church congregation, first of all mankind needs people for its existence.

People who live together, people who grieve together, people laughing together and celebrating together and as well having fun together.

People who rely and support each other but these people are never truly the same; their attitudes, their appearance, their lives are often different and diverse.

People who are so diverse just the way God had created them, as the creator, and found them Good. People to whom God also wants to establish a relationship or has already built.

And at the same time you have changed, as well as the world, the city in which you or I live - just like all the Christian communities in the world, the Church, to which we belong - has changed.

And that's not really bad, but rather good!

Already in the 16th century, Martin Luther had characterized this change for the Church in general and the Christian communities in a later common phrase: "ecclesia semper reformanda".

That is - in short words - the Church needs to change, adapt, move with the times and thereby should revert repeatedly to the same extent, not only to Christian values, but of course on Jesus! Again and again! Again and again a new, without betraying the mission of proclamation! Without betraying the Gospel's message itself.

First of all, the Church as a community or as a building, as well as this beautiful "Church of the Ascension" here in Savannah, is not a rigid building.

It is not a place where one only remains or endures life.

Also, Church is not a fortress, not a "Fort Knox of faith", but a living and creative - and sometimes fragile - structure with, by and for people - supported by God.

A meeting place of people among themselves and - this is mostly important - with God.

What makes the Church alive, is not the building alone, whether you come on Sundays for prayer and praise, but it is rather the people, the congregation in which the gospel is preached and the sacraments quite rightly administered.

This is not only what it stands for in the Augsburg Confession, but what has been practiced here in Savannah and lived - since 1734 - started by "Johann Martin Bolzius"!

One of my professors in Hermannsburg always asks students "What makes a church, a church" - and points at the end of all the discussions exactly on these two things: preaching and sacraments.

And what makes a church, a church, which one needs to keep in mind - not only for the people of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and no matter whether it is at home or any where else in the world, also for the Catholics and every other Christian denomination, preaching and sacraments is necessary.

After all, even the Roman-catholic Church is on the way of "ecclesia semper reformanda" - the reformation of the Church; had taken a major step with the 2nd Vatican Council, and in my opinion it has reformed and launched some of the things - that had been more than 400 years ago denounced by Luther and the Reformers.

We see also that the Church and structures are changing - are in flux - some earlier and some later.

And I would go much further to say that even the coexistence of people, maybe the living together of different nations in the world, is changing and must change.

This is important to know - at the present time as we are increasingly relying on cultural changes.

In Europe - in my home country - we are currently experiencing such a revolution which is not easy.

Something - that scares many people, which as well demands much power of all those involved. There are changes, big changes, by the direct encounter and clash of various cultures and beliefs.

For our Western society, whether it is here in Savannah, the USA or for us in Europe, it causes people of different cultures to live

together, meet more frequently – sometimes freely and sometimes not.

Sometimes we do not see these changes ourselves, we do not perceive this immediately; and perhaps, we are seeing it only from afar or in the view of the past.

And many a time - and I think this is familiar to you - you will suddenly determine that, out of nothing something new - something foreign - appeared instead of the familiar one.

And a first normal human reaction is; that one is horrified; that one rejects what one perceives for the first time.

And sometimes - you will notice later - that this new thing amended and broadened the mind of one's own life and the lives of others.

Martin Luther was named a "Wild Boar in the vineyard of the Lord". He questioned and finally broke up old structures! Without this, there would not have been the establishment of the church here in Savannah in 1741.

First, there had been theological insights and questions of faith that secondly marked the starting point of a long journey and the development; that finally brought all of us up here - to this place - on this continent. At this place called "New World" in 1734.

It is a journey towards the "Lutheran Church of the Ascension" here in Savannah- which next year - can look back to 500 years of Reformation; in its 276<sup>th</sup> year of its existence.

You see another party is ahead.

It is a 500-year anniversary which should also stimulate us at the same time, to think about what happened in the past when believers – all Christians- became separated; in addition to all the joy of the values of our Lutheran faith findings.

A still not fully overcome separation; triggered by Martin Luther's **Sola Scriptura** - only the Scripture and not tradition,

**Sola Fide** - justification by faith and not a coin thrown into the chest, **Sola Gracia** - by God's grace alone and not by man-made and finally **Solus Christus** - Christ alone!.

The Way of the Salzburg pastors in exile, emigration into their new home here in Savannah is certainly such a living sign of separation of the past. But also as a sign of a first non-voluntary change that affects the life of the people until today - but at the same time showing the opportunities that lie in the encounter with people in and from other countries.

So if you take a look into the past, then it is noted that a lot more has changed today than what the founding fathers of this church here in Savannah or Martin Luther had ever imagined.

Changes not only in family, but also socially and politically.

And in all these social and political changes, it is not just about knowing that America isn't a colony of England anymore - long time ago when the first Lutheran arrived here; and it is not just about the knowledge of slavery or apartheid from history books only, which due to the American Civil War becomes a global character, as a basis for liberation and justice, to represent the future of people's freedom in the present.

In addition to the dream of freedom, the people here in the US and surely here in Savannah have always lived - at least from a European perspective -, one recognises that all these changes, are as well about freedom of belief.

Something which was very important for the founders of the church.

The ability to live Christian faith - at least in the Western world; as the founders have found it for themselves here in the "Church of the Ascension" - 275 years ago.

Today the ancestors and founders of the Church would certainly not need to emigrate from Europe to Savannah anymore to live their faith.

An achievement, however, that is far from any reality in other parts of the world. People are still being persecuted and killed because of their religion around the globe.

By this you should think over again, when one looks back at the new beginning and the reasons for this beginning, here in Savannah, 275 years ago.

The story of the "Church of the Ascension" certainly begun with the Reformation itself; people belonging to the Protestant, Lutheran faith. But for the flight to America, the new beginning away from home, there were other reasons. There were about 20,000 Protestant religious refugees in 1731- had their home in Salzburg and needed to leave due to a deportation decree of the Archbishop.

Fortunately, the majority of the faithful found a new home in Prussia, some went to the Netherlands. And several hundreds finally found refuge in North America in 1734 - thanks to the intercession and the help of the Augsburg preacher Samuel Urlsperger.

30 miles (km) northeast of here (Savannah, Georgia), they founded their first settlement, "Ebenezer". Surprisingly, when looking back; on the run and on the crossing from Netherland and England, no one lost his life, but by the unaccustomed climate, the hard life that was so different from their original homeland - nowadays called Austria, increasingly children and adults as well died in the early days.

The beginning in Georgia, the living in Savannah was not easy. It was tedious and difficult.

It was not a country where milk and honey flowed only, where grapes fall in ones mouth, even if the possibilities were certainly good.

But the beginning has always been marked by determination and willpower, even in religious matters. Worship, baptisms, weddings and funerals - the whole spectrum of church life had accompanied the people here from the beginning.

And from the early beginning it was not only faith, but the community as one essential companion; Compassion and hospitality

that continues to characterize the people here locally. Something that one finds in the "Southern Hospitality"; the southern hospitality as Pastor Yost, already announced to me prior to my visit.

Perhaps the roots or beginnings of this hospitality lie in the experiences and hardships, the helplessness of people, as the people from Salzburg and the "Germans" followed them in 1737 and 1739, which had been given as a refugee and newcomers care and protection. And even though it may not be so, I think it's at least a good thought.

But let us have a look after all the history of this church itself - which, however, certainly, in the face that you do not want to listen for several days here, can only be fragmentary.

Lutheran church life and worship have always been conducted in Georgia since 1734, decisively accompanied and executed by the pietistic pastors Bolzius and Gronau. But again and again when they arrived from "Ebeneza" they both criticized the behaviour of human beings and particularly of the German Lutherans in Savannah. Religion, religious practice was not always in the foreground, but survival in a place where 500 people lived at that time only.

The Lutherans here in Savannah were no by indication Christians, no saints, and especially no pietists, like Bolzius and Gronau expected. Also Reverend Muhlenberg, who was in his life twice in Savannah, was not impressed by the spiritual life, but perhaps Savannah Lutherans were even more precisely oriented to Martin Luther, who advised Melanchthon once in a letter: *"Be a sinner and sin strongly, but more strongly have faith and rejoice in Christ"*

Whatever the various reasons for conflicts and disagreements of community and pastors were, General Oglethorpe, founder of the colony of Georgia, consisted of fixed service times for the "Germans" together with the conversion of a house owned by Thomas Jones, a final step and foundation for their own Church of Savannah. Commenting on today's "Church of the Ascension", whose history officially begins in 1741 on April 14th.



From the establishment of the community to its own church was still a long way. Another 30 years they had to wait before the "Germans" were able to buy the piece of land on which today's Church of the Ascension stands.

Was it initially mixed communities of Anglicans, Pietist, Reformed and Lutherans, who lived together in a kind of early ecumenism, was it like now, next to the Anglican and Reformed, a Lutheran church!

A church to worship and the praise of the Almighty God! And special thanks to:

John Eppinger, Matthias Ash, George Ducker, John Sheek, Adam Eirick, Frederick Fahm and John Neidlinger.

But a restless time was ahead of the few Lutherans and the people in Savannah, as elsewhere in Georgia. It raged war of independence, but fortunately Savannah got away with a black eye, because the British left the city in 1782 without a fight. A "Grande Nation" was born and something else was unstoppable.

The transition from German to the American English language - which I personally regret a little - which would have linguistically helped me today very much! But change was important for the expansion and survival, especially the Lutheran Church in America.

While the Ebenezer congregation struggled in the aftermath of the War of Independence with many problems, linguistically and also inter-religiously. Here there was, in the words of Pastor Bergmann, who preached as previously like Bolzius, just stop!

Better and more lively was the 19th century, along with numerous changes in community life; and in changes of some internal and external structures. But even the growth of the city helped.

A change of this period, which certainly had impact on the Church of the Ascension, was the formation of the General Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America. Because this was responsible for the theological rediscovery of Lutheranism, a "Lutheran awakening" which then took hold in this century!

For further development and the future direction of the Church of the Ascension one can name one person. Reverend John Bachmann, coming from the New York Synod to the South, who played an important role for Ascension as for Lutheranism in the South in its entirety. He was the one who reorganized the existing structures in the Savannah's congregation and was mainly attributed to ensure that the first full-time Pastor Stephen A. Mealy started his work in 1824.

With the establishment of the "Evangelical Lutheran Synod of South Carolina and Adjacent States" in the same year and its new pastor Mealy began the independence from Germany and its pastors for "Ascension".

Going ahead, in 1828 the first Sunday school was established, an important development in the American religious history - not only the Lutheran. An ecumenical Sunday school of Lutherans, Baptists, Reformed, Methodists and Presbyterians in 1833 shows not only the efficiency of the Church, but also the unity, despite all the differences, believing in one God. Something from which we can still learn today.

In other areas of education "Ascension" played an increasingly important role and the period of silence, as shortly before yet experienced by Bachmann, was over. And members of this church, can now be found on the boards of trustees of today's "Newberry College" and as well as of the "Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary".

But even dark spots are to be noted - although there were dissenting votes again. Because after initial rejection of slavery; it was allowed among Lutheran and other Protestant communities in 1749. Also Mealy, in his capacity as President of the Synod, spoke in favour of slavery.

A cruel development divided communities of all denominations, churches in North and South; intent in each side to justify their position within the Bible; believed on each side was God was on their side. And in the end it ultimately brought the "American Civil War", with it all kinds of atrocities and disasters. But to abuse God and the

Bible for human interests, which was never in the sense of Jesus, this we should learn about from the past.

However, until the shock of so many rushing down! Ascension congregation spent time and money on the construction of a new stone church. Since 1836 plans were drawn, advice, calculated and finally inaugurated in 1843.

Another positive result was the growing number of church members and participants of the sacrament. In 1851, 100 communicants exceeded for the first time and 1852, in addition to the new building the church got a new organ from Philadelphia, to bear the sound of Luther's "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God" far into the heaven.

1864, war turned the church into a hospital and parts of the interior were destroyed, a tribute to the civil war. But even if it sounds bad, the German Lutheran community was not as lucky as the "Church of the Ascension," because it was destroyed by General Sherman's army.

Women have always been a driving force in church history as well as at Ascension! They were the motor to get a facelift for the Sunday school, as well as the church building itself. 1875 numerous alterations to the church building started, which took almost 4 years to complete. Also, even an initial accident in which a worker had broken his arm, the novel appearance could not stop.

The Congregational life in Ascension was active by that time but was also repeatedly disrupted and interfered by numerous occurrences and as well directed into other paths. As a result of the segregation after 1867, for example, there were only white church members left, religious education and mission among the coloured people no longer existed; Segregation instead of integration. But hurricanes, heavy storms, heavy rains, and the outbreak of yellow fever shook the city and the community alike, not only providing lots of sadness, but also again and again delayed the expansion of the church.

But life goes on - unstoppable - and so the church was completed in 1879 and the organ from 1852 replaced. And at the end - the church was given a new name. Instead formerly known as Lutheran Church of Savannah, it got its current name: "Church of the Ascension", by

a large stained glass window showing the Ascension of Jesus Christ, donated by Mr. D.J. Purse.

The Value of the window at that time was many times much higher than now; as the values of the church and faith do not rely on the value of money or quantity.

Pastors changed, the community grew and yet the debt expressed in the minds of men from the church modelling. But here the pastor and the church leadership found again and again solutions, over time until today.

There is actually so much more to report about the church and its congregation, I do not really know where to stop now.

Until today, there are many events which actually apply to consider them even deeper, further and in more detail.

For example the renovation of church and organ in 1919, the reconstruction of the Sunday School in 1928 associated with a new glass elevator.

Purchases and sales of property, Church extensions, renovations or the recreation centre, choir and youth work, Reformation celebrations or the "Our Daily Bread" Café!

Just like the numerous ecumenical encounters in and around Savannah and beyond, in which this congregation has always had their place.

Or stories about the people feared here in the community in the numerous wars that had been fought in the last 275 years, in addition to the mentioned independence war or the American Civil War; Stories about the fear of parents for their children, women for their husbands, children from their fathers.

I can only say: Each of these occurrences have their own story; a story which would be worth to tell.

But one has always had continuance over the times and it is important for the church, congregation and for their pastors: to

strengthen and accompany the people with God's Word, spending the sacraments in the right way at all times.

This is perhaps what has always been shining through Centuries, until now, and also what the church and the body of believers stand for.

Finally, I would like to be a little provocative in my remarks now.

Our own lives, how we live together with other people, as well as our community and church life are constantly changing. It is a kind of "humanitas semper reformanda" - humanity that is continually reformed, which develops and repeatedly gaining new insights. And looking back at these 275 years of Ascension, you notice as well as I, that in the course of time many things have changed.

And therefore I would like to conclude asking; and this might sound a bit provocative:

"What are we actually celebrating today, when we look at 275 years Lutheran Church in Savannah, look back to the beginning of the Church of the Ascension?"

For me, it can not only be a year that one has achieved, just like one celebrates a big birthday of a man. It is certainly not the size of the church building reached today, or the wonderful community hall, or the number of people who belong to this congregation now. Also, it is certainly not the wonderful choir, or the remarkably youth work installed, or everything else needed for a vibrant community that can be found and exists here in Savannah – this is regardless for me in church history whether one belongs to Lutheran or another denomination.

In my view, it cannot primarily be the foundation, which was placed by Johann Martin Bolzius, Israel Christian Gronau or even Henry Muhlenberg for the Lutheran Church in America.

Certainly, that's all more than remarkable. This is all to be worth mentioned, respected and honored without

any question and doubt.

But is this really what we are celebrating today?

If I'm honest, that's not the main reason for me.

At least it cannot be the only reason for me because in my eyes it lies simply elsewhere.

Because first of all we are celebrating that we as children of God, as his creation, have found a place where we can praise him and honor him. A spot in life not only as a place in the history of the city of Savannah, but where one can proclaim as church of the Lutheran Confession the Word of God, the truly and wonderful gospel in the name of Jesus Christ.

We are celebrating what 275 years ago people had found, a place here in Savannah where they could be together in the love and comfort of God; in the name of Jesus Christ; that we can peacefully express in togetherness our belonging to God, the Almighty, and certainly commit ourselves to him. Something I've read in a different form of a document of this church: "God be with you, with me and our neighbors!"

We are celebrating the fact that we have found another place on this earth where we can be close to God and receive his love that he gives us from his ample and exuberant grace.

Here is a place for anyone and everyone at the table of the Lord, and this has been happening for 275 years.

We are celebrating that God has accompanied people for 275 years at this place and is with all of them in days of joy and sorrow, hatred and love, in friendship, in fear and anxiety, in hope and in all other moments in which life - in whatever form - has changed.

And that brings me to my final question, which relates to the future!

What is the future for us, for the Church in general?

What holds the future for the Lutheran churches in Europe or America and in particular for the "Church of the Ascension" here in Savannah?

If I'm honest, I do not know!

And if you respond, dear brothers and sisters, then you might have had an idea, a hope or a wish. But do you really know the answer?

The world around us is changing so rapidly fast as hardly before. And certainly, faster than people had experienced 275 years ago; much faster than the founders of this church, who found a new mental, spiritual home and livelihood for themselves at this place, far away from their old home.

So, if I'm honest, I do not know!

Things which seemed impossible 10 years ago, are now a matter of course.

Diseases, for which there are no medicines today, tomorrow may already be cured.

Things we were afraid of before or things which are different in our society now,  
Things we outlaw and condemn today,  
Things we condemn morally and perhaps ethically today,  
but those things perhaps will not worry people anymore at all in the future, because they would have become the norm.

How this is done has already been shown to us from the past.

It is surely not only the past of the last 10, 20 or 100 years - or even the last 275 years - but the past of mankind.

So what does the future hold, what is the forecast for all of us - for you and for me?

There is really no right or wrong answer, except one.  
And with this response, I am absolutely safe and of that I am more than convinced.

The future, our future, lies in the hands of God! Like the way the future has always been laid by the hands of God for the people of Ascension since 275 years

The future of all mankind and of this congregation is in the hands of God who has always been, who always is and who will always be.

It is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

He, the indescribably great and loving God, who has become man in Jesus Christ for us people here in Savannah and everywhere in the world; he wants to continue to accompany people in his community of a living body of the church to empower them to do their job further.

He will do it for the next 10, 20 or 275 years, and then beyond, to all eternity. And perhaps, to better understand the future as the will of God - I refer to words of Martin Luther:

I have held many things in my hand,  
and I lost them all;  
but whatever I have placed in God's hand,  
that still possesses!"

Thank you for your attention and endurance to listen to me.  
May the good Lord in his utmost goodness bless you all.

Br. Christian Priesmeier  
Savannah, GA, USA  
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