

Baccalaureate Address
Chapel of the Resurrection, Valparaiso University
May 16, 2010

Good morning!

It doesn't quite seem real.

Here you sit. With these awkward robes on. Maybe more than a few butterflies in your stomach. Your family is here. Maybe your girlfriend or boyfriend, or your fiancé. People you love. People who love you.

Here you sit in this place. Maybe you are Lutheran and this chapel has been a regular part of your Valpo week. You know its every nook and cranny. You studied these windows, the altar, and this amazing *Christus Rex* breaking free of the burden and death of the cross. Maybe you are Christian, but not Lutheran, worshiping or attending events in this place from time to time, but not fully comfortable with its magnificence and the rituals performed in it. Maybe your faith tradition is not Christian, or you have no faith tradition. Maybe you lost your faith, or your belief in any organized religion. And maybe you do not believe in the concept of God.

Yet, here you sit. On this day. In this place. You walked past this chapel each day. You drove past it as you entered the campus. Perhaps, like me, you used the chapel as a point of navigation when you first arrived on campus, so you could find your way to your first classes, or determine the direction of the town, or the Target, or the Dunes. Maybe you used the bells of the carillon to navigate your day, listening for the chimes to determine the hour, or to plot the amount of time before your next class or your next meeting.

Regardless of your background or belief, this chapel is inextricably woven into the life and experience of students, faculty, staff, and those who visit Valparaiso University. It is a place to be reckoned with.

O. P. Kretzmann served as president of Valparaiso University for 28 years. He conceived this chapel, raised the funds to build it, and established many of the rituals that we carry on here today. On the 10th anniversary of the chapel, President Kretzmann, nearing the end of his life, stood in this place and spoke these words:

“When this chapel was built ... all who had anything to do with it—designers, architects, planners, generous donors, friends—all had a definite purpose expressed in various ways. **This chapel was to be a monument to Jesus Christ. It was to say that we, so late in time, still cling to the God of Grace, Redemption and Sanctification.** ... This chapel began to call us into the years that lie before us. **So, if at some dim and distant time we might have here a faculty, students and administration who no longer believe in the purposes of this chapel, it will still be necessary for them to come to terms with what this chapel represents. They can never quite get away from this silent witness to our faith.**”

A half-century later, here we sit. In this place. Reflecting on our past. And like the generations who sat where you are now seated, we cannot help but peer into the years that lie before us.

Some days I wonder if we are in that dim and distant time that President Kretzmann imagined. Political partisanship has polarized our nation and divided us as a people. Rancor has poisoned the national discourse. Greed has toppled or crippled many of our corporations and financial institutions. Our refusal to live within our means has left our nation and much of the world with an uncertain economic future. Our educational system is in disarray. Teachers, revered in many other cultures around the world, are subjects of derision and scorn by politicians and parents. We fear other nations overtaking our prized position as the most powerful and wealthy nation in the world. We worry about being overtaken and overrun by immigrants. We demand our individual right to own and carry weapons and wring our hands about the violence in our cities, our workplace, our schools.

Even the Church of Christ appears paralyzed by crisis, appropriated by politicians for political gain, and torn apart by the cultural hysteria surrounding some of our thorniest questions about the beginning and end of life and the nature of human sexuality and gender. Militant fundamentalism and its unholy alliance with terrorism threaten to plunge the entire world into chaos. And darkness.

In luce tua, videmus lucem.

In Your light, we see light. Psalm 36:9.

This is the motto of Valparaiso University. In 1926, President W. H. T. Dau selected this motto for our campus when Valparaiso University was rescued from the brink of bankruptcy by a group of Lutheran businessmen and revived as a Lutheran university.

Soon-to-be-graduates, you have encountered this motto, *in Your light we see light*, in ways both subtle and overt during your years here. From the torches that greet you at the entrance to the campus and the words sung by the angels that greet you at the entrance of this Chapel, from the words that appear in these magnificent windows to the words that surround the capital V on the university seal on the diploma you will soon receive. These words, *In luce tua, videmus lucem*, are manifest and manifold in this place.

We also believe that these words, *In luce tua, videmus lucem*, are manifest and manifold in you and through you. There is a collective story out there in the world that goes like this: You can always spot a Valpo graduate, because Valpo graduates have a light burning in them. The light of knowledge and wisdom. The light of integrity and character. The light of leadership. The light of service. The light of God.

Even in my short two years as president of Valparaiso University, I have come to believe in and tell this collective story about Valpo graduates. I have met our graduates across the country and around the world. Graduates from the 1940s and those from 2009. People like Dr. Kurt Senske, whom you will hear today as your commencement speaker, and NPR correspondent and author Jacki Lyden,

who will receive an honorary doctorate today. These are remarkable people. And after my 30 years in higher education encountering thousands of students on nearly every continent, I can tell you that there is indeed something special about a Valpo graduate, that there is something special about you.

There is a light in you and with you. You may not see it yet in yourself, but others can and will see it in you.

Those of us who are Christian associate light with God and with goodness. From the creation story in Genesis, to John's final words in the book of Revelation that we heard today, we believe that from the dawn of creation to the end of the world as we know it, that God is light, Jesus is light, and that we are called to be the light of the world, the light that darkness cannot overcome.

In today's reading from Revelation, John comes to the end of an extraordinary account of a vision of the future, a vision given to him by angels sent from God. It is both a glorious and terrifying vision of the end of time and place as we know it. In this closing chapter, John recounts the words of Jesus heard in the vision.

Jesus reminds us, "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End."

Even with the mayhem, death, and destruction John foretells as the future of our world, here are these comforting words from the eye of the Apocalypse. In all the emptiness and loneliness at the dawn of creation, I was there. In all of the chaos and confusion at the end of times, I will be there. And in the uncertainty and worry of today and tomorrow, I am here with you.

Jesus says, I am the bright Morning Star. So bright, so strong, that my light will shine through the night, through the dawn, and into the first day of a new creation. I am here! Set your course, plot your navigation with me in sight.

In luce tua, videmus lucem!

Soon-to-be-graduates, no matter how confident or uncertain you are about what lies ahead for you, know that, through your experience here, the light in you has grown stronger. And if you let your light shine through in all that you do, others will see it in you, and you will be blessed, and blessed, and blessed. Not always in the ways that you may desire or expect. For God is full of surprises.

Certainly, John was surprised as the angels revealed what God has in store for the future of fallen humanity. Most certainly, as John penned the Book of Revelation, he believed that there would be a reckoning, in the same way that President Kretzmann imagined that future generations at Valparaiso University would have to reckon with "what this chapel represents . . . [as a] silent witness to our faith."

Soon-to-be graduates, throughout your lifetime, you will have reckonings with this chapel and this university. That word, "reckoning," is a potent one. For accountants, reckoning has to do with the settling of accounts, bringing them into balance. For seafarers, reckoning is the calculation of a

ship's position using astronomical information. For the rest of us, reckoning refers to the settlement of differences, the process of reconciliation.

You came to Valparaiso University, and while you were here, you reflected on the gifts you have been given by God. You articulated your vocation, that which you believe you have been called to do in this world. You peered into the future and imagined who you might become and what you might accomplish in your labors. You came to this place and prayed for God to prosper the work of your hands.

Now, Valparaiso will forever be that place of reckoning, of settling accounts between where you are in life and the dreams you had here, the promises you made, and the prayers you raised. You will continue to navigate through life calculating your course using this place as a point of reckoning. And when you return here, and we hope and pray that you will return, you will remember with both joy and sadness, the days and nights spent here, with these people whom you have grown to love, and the dreams you have dreamt together.

You will take your light into the world and take on the darkness and chaos of these times. You will use the Morning Star to chart your course. And, one at a time, wherever God will take you, you will change the world.

And for those of us whom you leave behind, we will forever be reckoning with the legacy of O.P. Kretzmann and the others who built this magnificent witness. Even as Lutherans and Christians in general descend into greater conflict and chaos, victims of the rancor of these dark and disturbing times, this university will strive to be a beacon of light and a center for reconciliation. We will work and pray, even as Christ prayed:

“that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. ²²I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: ²³I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. “

And we Christians, like John, say, “Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.” Come to this place. Bring others to this place. Fill us with your light. Be our Morning Star.

And I, like John, close this chapter in our lives together with his benediction: “The grace of the Lord Jesus be with God's people.” So be it. Amen!

