

Wow.

That was the first word I spoke to the Synod following my election to the Office of Bishop at our Assembly last May, and it seems fitting that it is the word I use to open my first report to you as the Bishop of the Eastern Washington-Idaho Synod.

As part of the bishop election process, Bishop Emeritus Wells planned and provided multiple opportunities for pastors in the synod to learn about being bishop, to talk to current and former bishops, to learn about the realities of the job, and just what exactly it is that a Bishop does. Already being in discernment about a call to this office, I faithfully attended each opportunity to learn.

I have now been your bishop for almost eight months. I can say that while those opportunities were incredibly helpful, they were in no way able to encompass the breadth and depth of this call. The deep holiness of the work. The energizing opportunities I would be given to meet the rostered leaders and people of this Synod. The passion and joy and faithfulness that I have been allowed to cannonball into as I have been welcomed across our synod, splashing one another with the goodness of God who has called us together as the people of the Eastern Washington-Idaho Synod. How my eyes would be opened to the ways that our ELCA works across the three expressions—congregations, synods, and the Churchwide office, each of us supporting one another to do the work that none of us could do alone. In the last eight months I have been blessed by meeting leaders across our church who are earnestly engaged in addressing the challenges our church faces in these times.

It is easy to focus on the negative realities we see around us. Sanctuaries that are not as full as they once were. Budgets that are shrinking. Buildings that are too big and volunteer pools that are too small. We look back longingly to the days when our congregations could easily support pastoral staff, when Sunday Schools were full, and confirmation classes numbered in the dozens. When many churches were able to finance building projects out of congregational giving instead of from the Mission Investment Fund—or contemplate building programs at all! A friend of mine likens this looking back to the ancient Israelites longing for the “fleshpots of Egypt” when Moses was leading them through the wilderness for forty years.

When we don't know where we're going, we forget all the difficulties that existed in the place we've been taken from and polish our memories to the point where we can't imagine a future that is better than our past. When we get tired of the manna and quail that are provided by God without our effort, we begin to think that the cucumbers and leeks that we were enslaved to grow for harsh masters are worth more than our freedom. We begin to huddle nervously around the little bit that we have, not trusting that God will provide, only to find that the manna we've stockpiled against a rainy day has turned to maggots. We begin to resent staff salaries, mission support expectations, and other demands. We grumble about presiding bishops, synodical bishops, pastors, deacons, congregational presidents, councils, younger generations who won't step up and take over the hard work, and older generations that won't realize their time is over and let go.

In the election last year, the scripture that had heavily influenced me was the story from the gospels about the Loaves & Fishes, and I shared that with the Assembly—that God will provide what we need, when we need it, and that (if multitudes of stories in scripture are any indication) what God provides will

be vastly more than what we need. Whether that's feeding thousands of people with 5 loaves and 2 fish, or a bit of flour and oil that last for the length of an entire famine, or oil in lamps that should only last a matter of hours lasting for days—the story that Scripture tells us over and over again is the story of a God that is overflowing with abundance toward God's people. That where God's people see scarcity, God laughs and sees abundance.

I want to tell you: God is faithful to overflowing to the Eastern Washington-Idaho Synod. We are bathed in the oil that anoints as us God's Chosen People. We splash in the waters of baptism that gave us a new name—Child of God—as across the synod, people are stepping forward and choosing to look for abundance, instead of focusing on what used to be, leaning hard into the words of Jesus, “Never will I leave you or forsake you.” And “Behold, I will be with you always, even to the end of the age.”

The church IS changing. It is no longer the church of our youth—no matter what generation we belong to. But from my vantage point: I give thanks for the changes I can see. Changes that are already here. Changes that are in process. Changes that are just beginning to slip over the edge of our horizon. I can't tell you what the church will look like in five years. But I know it will be here. Because she is the Bride of Christ, and he will not leave her forsaken. I give thanks to God who provides leaders who are learning to tune their ear to the music of the future, rather than being seduced by the songs of the past. I give thanks for the people of this synod who, like Thomas, have decided that following Jesus is the only option—even if following Jesus looks like death instead of life.

Our very Christology as Lutherans teaches us that it is when God looks most defeated we know that God is doing the mightiest work—imagine, if you will, what the Crucifixion looked like to the disciples witnessing it in real time, instead of what it looks like to us who know how the story ends. It would look like everything is falling apart. All promises coming up null and void. All expectations coming to naught.

It would look, perhaps, a little bit like what we see in our churches. And my hunch is that it would feel pretty similar. Because the way we know Jesus is through what we hear, see, learn, and experience in our congregations. And when our congregations are dying: we feel as though Jesus must be dying, too.

God has called us into a time of wilderness wandering. We will need to trust one another to make it through. We will need to be frankly honest that where we're going will be nothing like where we've been—and we need to grieve what we have lost, in order to be able to take up what will come. We need to remember that the past is often not as glorious as our memories would indicate and remind one another that God is going ahead of us to prepare a place for us.

What I have learned in my last eight months as your bishop is that whatever is coming will be worth it. I have been granted a unique place from which to see what God is working on. As I look out across this Assembly, I see faithful, engaged people who will be part of what is coming next. And I know that there are hundreds of others in our synod, who will gather on Sunday for worship who are heeding God's call to what comes next. As I gather with other bishops and Churchwide leadership I see gifted people who are working hard to think of ways to engage the rapidly changing world around us in and new faithful ways.

This will be slow, hard, painful work. And that is what tells me: we're not dealing with death. We're part

of something new coming into the world. We're not part of something coming to the end of life. We're part of something being born! Our synod is not dead. Our synod is not dying. Our old way of doing things will probably not survive. But something new will rise. That is what our God does—bring light to dark places, life where we expect to find death, hope where we expect despair, joy where we expect grief.

People of Eastern Washington and Idaho. People of Thayne and Jackson Hole. People of Ontario, Oregon. God has brought us together at this place and in this time to bear witness to miracles. I am so incredibly blessed to be one called to leadership in these days—but I do not lead alone. Nor can I. You lead with me. Let us follow the Good Shepherd into the future that has been prepared for us from the First of Days and prepare ourselves for a Holy Surprise!

Soli Deo Gloria, to God be the Glory.



Bishop Kristen Kuempel