

Well, I don't know if the cat is out of the bag yet,

but just in case it isn't, let me just go ahead and say it plainly:

It has been a little stressful to be on staff

at Epiphany Lutheran Church in the past few months.

I know that might be hard to believe,

so let me unfold this scenario a little bit.

This week after the 11:15 service

we will be saying our goodbyes to John Scheusner and his family

as they go off to internship in Vandalia.

Last week we celebrated fourteen years with the Wiese family

and wished them Godspeed on their new adventures in Georgia.

We are in the final stages of a building program for the new Austin Campus.

We are looking forward to our first worship and dedication there on August 15th.

As a staff, our daily vocational tasks have needed to shift

due to these and other transitions.

Those of us that are still here are learning our new roles and changing ministries.

And, we all know how well Lutherans deal with change.

It hasn't been easy.

It has been sad.

It has raised our anxieties.

It has caused apprehension about the future –

even as we share in the joy and excitement

that these new adventures are bringing.

But changes and transitions are rarely easy.

In fact, it can be much easier to avoid the changes

and instead day dream about the past and how things used to be.

And maybe even to wish for those former days to reappear.

I think it is especially easy to walk down that path

when we are saying goodbye and reminiscing about fond memories.

However, God rarely calls us to stay stuck in the past for very long.
In fact, I think when we do remember,
reminisce and celebrate our past
God often uses those memories to propel us into the future.
And here at Epiphany, we have a lot on our plate for the future.
To help us figure out this transition time,
this week begins a new three week series
helping us re-discover our mission identity.
In this series we will discuss how we are commissioned by God,
where we might be tempted to hesitate in mission,
and finally the ambition God gives us to reach out as a part of his kingdom.
So, to begin, let's start thinking about what it means for us
as disciples of Jesus to be the body of Christ.
How do we live our lives in response to all that God has done for us,
is doing for us
and promises yet to do for us,
in this corner of the world in the year 2010?
As a congregation we have spent years to get us to where we are now
and we are standing on a precipice.
At times like this,
taking steps forward into ministry can pose an enormous challenge.
Mission truly is a leap of faith
and it may seem like it would be easier just to leap off and run away
than to leap forward.
This certainly has been the case for other congregations
and ministries throughout history
and it is no different for our congregation.

Traditionally, whenever there is a change,
some people leave and some people join.

Change can be too much for some to handle.

That was true even when the Christian church was just beginning.
Our gospel lesson this evening/morning begins with a stark reminder of this fact.

The first phrase we read together was,
now the eleven disciples went to Galilee.

Only eleven.

Judas had already betrayed Jesus and left their community.

How sad that must have been.

I'm sure that was a challenge for this group of disciples,
especially as they faced the enormous changes in their midst.

In our text for today, the disciples are experiencing the first Easter Sunday.

Jesus had been crucified three days earlier
and they were still living in the reality that their teacher, leader and friend
was no longer with them.

Now at this point,

Mary Magdalene and other women
had already been to the tomb and seen the risen Lord.

They told the other disciples
and Jesus' group went on ahead to Galilee to meet him.

And there he was, just as he said he would be.

And once they were all together, the disciples worshipped him,
even amidst their doubts.

And who can blame them for having doubts?

But even through that, there was worship and there was ministry.

Jesus showed up, he was resurrected, just as he promised.

Jesus came back to his disciples and gave them his final instruction.

And his final instruction came with a promise.

Not a promise filled with fear and threats,
but a promise filled with encouragement and hope.
One that reaches all the way back to the very beginning of Matthew's gospel
and reminds us of who Jesus is.
When Jesus returns to his disciples he reminds them of what they already know.
Jesus has been given all the power in heaven and on earth.
He has chosen each of them to serve alongside him.
Not to go ahead of him, or be on their own,
but to serve alongside him.
And because Jesus has been given all the power,
he tells them that as they go on their way they are to make disciples.
And I love the assumptions Jesus makes.
In this commissioning of the disciples,
Jesus doesn't say "if you go" or
"when you get to a certain city or village,"
the Greek words behind this text actually assume
the disciples are on the move.
Jesus' invitation to mission assumes that as disciples,
they will be moving throughout the world.
And as they go, they go with a purpose, a single mission.
The only task Jesus commissions them to do is to make disciples of all nations.
That's it.
Now how we do that he says,
is by baptism in the name of the Trinity
and teaching all that he has commanded –
but the only imperative in his instruction is to make disciples.
How we do the baptizing,
how we do the teaching
– not really the concern here.

The concern is making disciples,
crafting relationships with other people and with God.
And then Jesus says, "Remember, I am with you always."

And those comforting words recall the very beginning of Matthew's gospel.

At the very beginning of Matthew's story before Jesus was born,
Joseph was afraid.

He was afraid to take Mary as his wife.

He was worried for himself and for her.

He had even made plans to keep Mary from the disgrace
that her pregnancy would cause.

And in a dream an angel came to him and said

"Do not be afraid."

And also, "this child that Mary will bear will be called Emmanuel,
which means God with us."

All the way back in the first chapter,

Jesus is being called "God with us."

And that is his promise to those who are anxious and worried
about the next steps in ministry.

Not just, "do not be afraid," but also, "I am with you!"

And guess what, he has all the authority of heaven and earth!

Through that authority, Jesus invites his disciples into mission
and commissions them to go and do work for the kingdom.

That was true on the very first Easter and it is true for us today.

Jesus is still Emmanuel, God with us,
commissioning us on behalf of his kingdom.

Jesus is still calling us to serve alongside him,
giving us all that we need for the journey.

Jesus is still assuming that we are on the move and on the way.

And we are, aren't we?

Certainly the life of our congregation is on the move,

but in our lives outside the church we are on the move, too.

More than ever, our lives take us here, there and everywhere.

We are more mobile than ever in history.

And as we go, Jesus calls us to make disciples.

God calls us to be a part of what he is up to.

He uses our lives, our stories, our service and our finances

to be a part of the kingdom.

And that is what mission is about.

We are commissioned to be a part of God's kingdom.

We don't go and make disciples for ourselves or even for Epiphany.

We are called to baptize in the name of God,

not in the name of Epiphany

or the Far Hills Campus or the Austin Campus..

We are commissioned to continue Christ's work here and now.

This may mean that we are called out of our comfort zone.

No, strike that, this will mean that

we are called out of our comfort zone.

It may mean that we are called to support and encourage.

We are called to action

and we are called to move through change and transitions,

trusting that God is with us

and that we go with his blessing

and that we are blessed along the journey.

Change causes our anxieties to rise.

It may make us want to cling to what is current or wish for the past,

but God calls us to more than where we used to be.
God calls us forward and calls us with him to new things.
God has called the Wieses to Georgia.
God has called John Scheusner to internship.
As a congregation we have discerned God calling us to the Austin Campus.
God is also calling us to new ministries like a comprehensive women's ministry.
And while simply participating in a survey may not seem like giving much,
through our participation and our honest feedback,
through a willingness to serve and encourage,
through prayer and support
We have the potential to reach others.
We have the capacity to answer God's commission to make disciples.
And that is true for women's ministries
as much as it is true for the entire mission
and all the ministries that God is calling this congregation to.
Whether that is long standing ministries that continue to be life giving
like the pantry and drama ministry
or it is something entirely new like Upward sports
or a congregational service day.
Each of these have potential to reach out to many people.
We have the potential to share the gospel and to make disciples as
God calls and commissions us to work by his side.
Yes, these are times of not knowing the future are challenging.
But in these times God promises to show up
and meet us in the midst of our doubts and uncertainties.
The challenge God calls us to is to continue to move forward,
to continue to step out in faith.

Yes, this causes stress,
yes it would be easier to step back or to quit,
but God calls us to more than that.

He calls us to mission,
to be a part of what his is up to in this world
that he loves so much.

And as we go,
Jesus will meet us
just as he promised.