

Presiding Bishop Mark S. Hanson
Churchwide Assembly 2007

Genesis 11:1-9
Romans 8:14-17
John 14:8-17

Grace to you and peace in the name of the crucified and risen Christ. Amen.
Go. Go in peace. Serve the Lord. Go in peace. Share the good news. Remember the poor.
Christ is with you. And the people said, “Thanks be to God.”

Yes, at the very beginning of this assembly is an ending which is a sending to which we respond with thanksgiving. Those are the dynamic rhythms of the Christian life, are they not—the constant interplay of beginnings and endings and of being gathered and being sent?

In March, as Bishop Margarita Martinez was coming to the end of her earthly life, I joined the procession of people who came to be with her, to pray, to weep, and to thank God for this amazing servant of the Gospel. I did as many others at Margarita’s bedside were doing and as so many of you do as you accompany people on their final baptismal journey of dying in the faith—I anointed Margarita with oil, making the sign of the cross and praying, “Almighty God, look upon Margarita, whom you made your child in Baptism. Comfort her with the promise of life with all your saints in your eternal kingdom, the promise made sure by the death and resurrection of your son, Jesus Christ our Lord.”¹

At the end, we go back to the beginning when God already has leaked the final verdict on Margarita’s life, on your life and on mine. That verdict is “not guilty” or “innocent”—not because of anything you or I will or will not do in our lives, but on account of what Christ crucified and risen has done for us. God’s promise is that the end will be a new beginning—resurrection into new life in Christ. To that promise we cling through faith.

In the familiar story of the Tower of Babel, God is declaring an end: an end to humanity’s desire to build a tower to the heavens—to be God—and an end to humanity’s drive to consolidate power and wealth in a great empire. At least that is what I imagine the exiles in Babylon who heard the Babel story told believed God was saying. Rather than being gathered under the power of the false gods of Babylonian empire builders, God will scatter God’s people to the ends of the earth. The ending of our human drive to be god will become God’s sending of God’s people.

Copyright © 2007 Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). All rights reserved. This copyright notice must appear on all copies and reproductions. Copies may be produced for distribution within the ELCA by affiliated ELCA organizations.

¹ *Occasional services: A Companion to the Lutheran Book of Worship*, Commendation for the Dying, (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1982), 103.

Paul was writing to early Christians in Rome for whom professing openly that Jesus, not Ceasar, is Lord brought the very real possibility of alienation and persecution, arrest and even execution. What did Paul say? You are not slaves who live in fear, for God already has adopted you as God's child. By the power of the Holy Spirit you are set free to live by faith, for the future is God's gift to you. You are heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ. As you are sent in faith you will be led the Spirit of God.

In our Gospel reading from John, Jesus is engaged in his farewell discourse with his disciples. Jesus is preparing them for the ending of his earthly ministry. What will that ending mean for the disciples? It will be their sending. They will be sent in the power of the Holy Spirit, the Advocate, who will abide in them and they in the Spirit. Jesus' earthly ending will be the disciples' sending with the promise of the Gospel to do even greater works than Jesus had done.

We should not be surprised, should we? We know the Jesus story—the ending is always a sending with God's gracious promise of a new beginning. What is the ending in Matthew's Gospel? Jesus' sending and Jesus' promise, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations...And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."²

The ending in Mark's Gospel is a sending and a promise, "But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you."³ The ending in John's Gospel is Christ's sending and Christ's promise, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.' When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.'"⁴

The beginning of the Book of Acts is Jesus' promise and sending. "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."⁵ So it is only right that we begin this assembly by remembering our baptism, God's gracious new beginning in Christ, the ending of the power of sin, death, and the devil, and the beginning of our life of faith, which is a sending. Go in peace. Serve the Lord. Share the good news. Remember the poor. Christ is with you. And what is our response to being a sent church? Thanks be to God.

I want to share with you the question that has most preoccupied me as we have prepared for this assembly. It is this: will we gather at Navy Pier for the tenth Churchwide Assembly of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America out of our longing to be a settled church or out of our conviction that we are a sent church?"

Sometimes I wonder—even worry—that for too many of us ELCA stands for "Expectations Low. Climbing Anxiety." A church body with low expectations for what

² Matthew 28:19-20, NRSV

³ Mark 16:7, NRSV

⁴ John 20:21-23, NRSV

⁵ Acts 1:8, NRSV

the Holy Spirit is doing and can do in our lives and through our ministries. A church with climbing anxieties that our differences—especially over human sexuality—inevitably will lead to divisions. A church body that views declining membership as a prelude to almost certain demise. Such a church body will be tempted to become a settled church—seeking some kind of equilibrium or homeostasis to calm our anxieties and compensate for our low expectations of the Holy Spirit’s power, promise, and presence.

A sent church will be a restless—not an anxious—people. A restlessness born of high expectations that the Holy Spirit is going to show up and when the Holy Spirit shows up through the proclamation of good news of Jesus Christ, lives are changed, sins are forgiven, the alienated are reconciled, the poor hear good news, unbelievers come to faith, the sick are healed, the dead are raised, and people share in common all that they have, each according to their need.

Did you hear Jesus’ promise to his disciples? Do you believe him when he says that when the Holy Spirit comes to us and works through us, greater works than his will be done? It happened. Read the Book of Acts of the Holy Spirit if you do not believe it.

In a recent blog posting, Walter Brueggemann wrote, “In the Book of Acts, the church is a restless, transformative agent at work for emancipation and well-being in the world. Given this restlessness, it is inevitable that the church would collide with settled authority, the authority of the state (the Roman Empire) and the authority of “the church” (settled Judaism). Neither...are eager for restless transformation”⁶ In contrast, the church, powered by passion for the risen Christ and led by the Spirit, is portrayed as bold and daring in its enactment of a healed world.

Members of a settled church may find it acceptable that thirty percent of members are in worship weekly given all the competing demands on our harried and hurried lives.

Members of a sent church may consider following the example of the pastor who told me that he is not in worship one service per month. Instead, he goes to visit inactive members. He said, “Are they ever shocked to see me at their door at 11:00 a.m. on a Sunday morning!” Their first response is usually, “Oh no, pastor. Who died?” To which the pastor responds, “No one that I know of, but I was worried that you might be. We have not seen you at the Lord’s table for weeks. You must be famished. May I come in so we can talk?”

Members of a settled church often will feel discouraged, dwelling upon what they lack, longing nostalgically for a seemingly more glorious past, possessively holding on to money they believe is theirs, waiting hopefully for a new charismatic and creative pastor who will turn things around.

Members of a sent church are prayerfully discerning the variety of spiritual gifts given to each of the baptized. Shaped by living memory of the past, they are giving generously

⁶Walter Brueggemann, Theolog: The Blog of The Christian Century, April 2007, downloaded 10 July 2007 <http://www.theolog.org/blog/2007/04/brueggemann_ser.html>.

and constantly asking how God's money might serve God's mission for the sake of the world. They go out believing, "Since it is by God's mercy that we are engaged in this ministry, we do not lose heart ... But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us."⁷

A settled church may be tempted to ask first, "What kind of congregations need pastors?" A sent church will seek to discern first, "What kind of mission needs leaders?"

Pastors in a settled church will be thankful when a few parishioners at the door express appreciation for the sermon. Pastors in a sent church believe that today through their preaching, the Holy Spirit will add thousands to those who are being saved.

People from an increasingly diverse neighborhood who walk by a settled church might say, "Ssshhh, we don't want to disturb them. Those are the white folks in worship. Oh, they are so nice to invite us, but don't you suspect that if we went in and stayed, they would want us to become like them?"

People passing by a sent church might even say, "Oh my, oh my, they are filled with new wine in there! Do you hear all those languages, all the different rhythms of their songs? Why, I even hear them telling the mighty deeds of God in our native tongue." And when new neighbors enter that sent church, the members who are there expect to be changed by the presence of the new people.

Members of a settled church will be tempted to explain decreasing membership and declining attendance as being predictable, understandable, and even acceptable, given the changing demographics of the community. They might say, "Lutherans are not having as many babies, you know. Our young adult children are not moving back to the community, and members are transferring to those large non-denominational churches with all those programs. But we hope we can hang on. We think there is enough in the endowment fund so that at least most of us can be buried from our church like our ancestors were."

Those in a sent church believe as long as there is one person in the community who has not had a personal invitation to come and hear the story of Jesus, as long as there is one ecumenical partner or other ELCA congregation with whom to imagine new possibilities for their ministry, as long as one person in the area is forced to live in poverty or is being excluded for any reason such as the color of their skin or their immigration status, then God has placed us in a mission field to be Gospel-proclaiming, neighbor-serving, justice-seeking, earth-caring, and peace-making people.

Congregations, synods, and churchwide organizations in a settled church will be tempted to ask, "Being in relationship what do we get for our money?"

Those in a sent church will first ask, "What might God accomplish by virtue of our

⁷ 2 Corinthians 4:1, 7, NRSV

shared leadership and resources that God perhaps can't as effectively do in our separateness?"

It is tempting for a settled church to become self-absorbed. A settled church may not feel connected to each other or the community except when the Nicene Creed is spoken and therefore become separated from the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church.

A sent church will understand itself to belong to a "millennia-deep, globe-encircling" body of believers and constantly seek to experience and express unity and diversity in Christ's body.

Members of a sent church will expect to hold one another accountable. Marj Leegard, writer, farmer, and wisdom weaver once said, "For fifteen years, every Sunday, I have been told at the end of worship, 'Go in Peace. Serve the Lord.' But not once has anyone on the next Sunday asked, "So, Marj, how did it go? How did serving the Lord go this week?" Could that be in part what we will be doing this week—holding ourselves and one another accountable for how it has gone the past two years as a sent church?

As a sent, scattered people, we will be gathered each day around the means of grace, speaking the truth that it has not gone as well as God desires, for "we are captive to sin and cannot free ourselves."⁸ Ah, but we will hear words of absolution: "By grace you have been saved. In the name of Jesus Christ, your sins are forgiven."⁹ The bread and wine of Christ's body will be given, the Gospel proclaimed. We will confess the faith of the church, make intercessions, exchange the peace, gather offerings, sing our praises, and we will be sent. We will be sent in the power of the Holy Spirit with the promise of the Gospel. We will be sent. So, go in peace. Serve the Lord. Share the good news. Remember the poor. Christ is with you. And the people shouted, "Thanks be to God."

Amen.

⁸ *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, Holy Communion, Setting One (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006) 95.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 96.