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Four years, nine months, and seventeen days.

Four years, nine months, and seventeen days ago, Pastors George and Caroline officiated their final Sunday at CLC. I can still remember the wiping of tears from eyes as the final hymn played, and they processed out of the sanctuary and out of our lives.

I wasn't nearly as close to them as were most of you, and even my world was thrown for a loop. We were used to hearing the same voices, personalities, and old stories, every week for so many years, and now they were gone. Now that rock solid routine we had grown so accustomed to, was forever changed.

And so, we began our journey in the wilderness. Or, at least, that's what we thought at the time. I'll explain what I mean by that, in a moment.

I sat on council for the first time the following year. I knew nothing yet about how this place functioned, and I watched and tried to learn. As the months went by and we tried to maintain as much normalcy we could, something became painfully obvious: we were lost and virtually helpless, without Pastor George's leadership.

George RAN this place. He did EVERYTHING here. He had his hand in every detail of this congregation's business. And the only problem with that, was that when he was gone, we were left having almost no idea how to be church without him.

Now, please note that I said "almost" no idea... certainly, the situation, in the short term at least, wasn't life or death, yet. We knew how to manage the day to day operations and keep the bills paid. We also discovered how good we were, at being a *community center* for the Borough of Millvale. We knew how to *feed* and host the community, in the most literal sense.

But without George's leadership, what we had forgotten, was how to be CHURCH. We had forgotten how to *spiritually* feed the community. We did not know how to evangelize. We did not have vision for our future. Where were we taking CLC in the long term? What were our goals for CLC in five years? Ten years? Twenty years? Despite having incredibly talented lay leaders doing their best, we simply did not know. We were *dead in the water*.

And so, we continued to journey in the wilderness.

We saw a succession of men come and go behind this pulpit – I'd like to say, "women and men", but sadly no women were to be found among the group! A few were here for only a week or two. Others were here for a year or more. Some were retired pastors. Others were professional interims. One, was intended to have been a permanent hire, but for reasons which we won't go into today, things simply did not work out. We made memories with all of them, worshipped with them, met their families... and just when we started to get comfortable, we were already saying goodbye, and we were on our own once again.

And so, we continued to journey in the wilderness.

I remember the first time I met Pastor Scott. Weekday evening in the library, either a council meeting or an admin meeting, I can't remember for sure (they all blur together after a while) – my first impression was that I was blown away by his professionalism and preparedness. He had copies of his resume for everyone, a full list of responsibilities expected of him, and even a breakdown of exactly what he would do with his hours... you might think every pastor who showed up in the intervening time should have been as prepared, but I can assure you not all of them were. Scott was. In fact, he was so professional that I thought to myself "Wow... this guy means business. I hope he's not too stiff for us."

Little did I know!!

In the months that followed, Scott went to work, putting his own touches on CLC's ministries, and all his changes were warmly welcomed by everyone with open arms. Everything went smoothly without a hitch, everyone jumped onto the bandwagon, and we all lived happily ever after.

Wait, that was how it went, wasn't it? That's how I remember it... no one believes me? That's a shame. If any of you had believed me, I would have had some lovely waterfront property to show you...

We'll try again... Scott went to work. He began his reformation of this parish from top to bottom, leaving his stamp on our liturgy, our music, Sunday School curriculum, organizational structure, facilities, and he even managed to pull off a feat we'd been trying for years but hadn't completed, in combining our two morning worship services.

Nothing worth doing is ever easy. There were difficulties and divisions. There were threats to leave. There were heated debates in council meetings, and there were some hurt feelings.

And so, we continued to journey in the wilderness.

There is never any birth without birth pains, nor any growth without growing pains. There is never any new movement without battling Newton's First Law – objects at rest want to stay at rest. There is no progress, without overcoming that initial resistance to the evil word none of us wanted to hear: CHANGE.

You've all heard this one a million times, but I'm going to tell it again – “How many Lutherans does it take to change a light bulb?” It takes at least ten – one to change the bulb. The other nine, to complain that “The old bulb was better, it was a work of art, a piece of our congregation's history, donated by one of our historic families, we had no right to change it, this is just too much change, I'm out, I'm going to find another church.” (Because Lord knows that having to get used to a new congregation isn't more change than simply staying and opening our hearts to accept the new bulb.)

And so, some people left to go journey in the wilderness.

But as we worked, and continued to trust in Pastor Scott's judgment, we slowly began to realize something: that X factor we were missing... that ability to evangelize, that long term vision for the future... we started to perceive that Scott had it. It's hard to put your finger on “it”. You don't really know how to define what “it” is, but you just know “it” when you see “it”. Scott had “it”. And he knew, that you don't make “it” become a reality without some difficulties along the way. That doesn't make “it” not worth doing.

We met a leader who changed the course of our lives. From the moment we met him, he seemed to know us better than we knew ourselves. In his reorganization of the church, he reached out to every single one of us, and empowered us to find ways to bring our skills and talents to the table, and participate in the life of the congregation, making us take ownership of OUR church.

And of course, we learned that Scott was anything but a “stiff”. We've bonded with him at meals, parties, and over drinks. We've shared some off-color humor, rooted on the Steelers together, and we've hoped and dreamed about what the future could hold for CLC. Many of us have availed ourselves of his skills as a therapist. We've watched him bare his soul in his sermons, laying out his demons for all to see – he can hardly expect us to confront the darkest parts of ourselves and continue down the path of healing and transformation if he does not lead by example. Numerous new and returning members have told me the thing about Scott that impresses them the most is his genuineness, that he is a real, regular, ordinary fellow at heart and not some unapproachable religious figure. In that sense, he is more like Pastor George than some might like to admit.

And I, personally, am pleased to say that I've met someone who has become my mentor, my friend, and a father like figure to me, whom I hope will continue to be part of my life for a long time.

And evidently, we had as big of an impact on him, as he had on us! Every congregation believes they're “special”, of course. But in our case, it evidently says something that after having spent so much time in so many different places throughout his career, WE are the congregation that was special enough for Scott to want to call home for good. His standing in life right now has something to do with that, of course – he is in the homestretch of his career. But the important takeaway being, he doesn't need to work anymore – he could retire tomorrow if he chose – and yet he WANTS to remain here and continue working with us, because he's fallen in love with this community.

It became apparent, as the months went on, and we could all feel something special beginning, that it might be time to talk about making this arrangement permanent. We began that process, and as we expected, there was one last wave of “disagreement,” one last round of discussion to be had by some sisters and brothers with a different vision for CLC, making their voices heard, as they had every right to do.

As we experienced these late difficulties, we still felt our journeying in the wilderness, but it seemed like the end was near.

Sure enough, Scott was voted in. He became our permanently called pastor. Now, here we are... today, we formally install Scott into his new position.

Our journey in the wilderness is over, right? We've reached the Promised Land? Everything is going to be peaches and cream from this point forward?

Well... maybe. Maybe not.

This is a joyful occasion, to be sure. I don't want to drag us all down.

But... it is worth pointing out, that Scott will only be here for five years. It may sound like a long time, but it's going to fly by faster than we could ever imagine. Before you know it, we'll be right back in the same boat, needing to once again find a pastor.

I am incredibly humbled and honored to have heard from more than a few of you, your thoughts on who you would like to see become your next pastor after Scott... but a lot of things can change in five years. I'll be a different person, you'll all be different people, and CLC will certainly be one heck of a different congregation. Whatever is meant to be, will be. But it probably would not be wise to assume we know what's going to happen. It's entirely possible our next pastor after Scott will be someone totally unknown.

"Aw, Steve, I don't want to hear any of that today! This is supposed to be a happy day! How much longer do we have to wait until all this uncertainty is over?! When will we ever get back to that nice, comfy, predictable state of routine that we had with George and Caroline?! When will this journey be over??"

Well sisters and brothers, I hope you're beginning to figure out my theme by now: It is a fallacy to assume, that we will EVER get back to that nice comfortable homeostasis. Further, it is a fallacy to believe we should ever WANT to go back to that state! – That state in which we've plateaued, maintain the status quo, and everything is predictable because nothing is growing, so nothing ever changes. George and Caroline knew this. That's why one of the most brilliant decisions they ever made, was the decision to *leave*, when they realized they had done all they could do here.

The journey of our faith may not always take us thru wilderness. There will be stretches of dry desert, and there will be stretches of green, lush and prosperity. But the journey, *never ends*. We're always journeying. Our journey did not *begin* on the day George and Caroline left. We just became aware of the wilderness at that point.

My wife Julie and I took karate classes together for about nine years. We earned first, second and third degree black belts before hanging it up. (Don't mess with us, by the way.) We eventually stopped taking lessons for a variety of reasons – they were expensive, we had trouble fitting them into our schedules – but the one reason we didn't quit was because there was nothing else to learn.

We had new young students start all the time, who would always ask the same question very shortly after arriving: "When am I going to be done?"

Now, what does that mean, "done"? What are they trying to ask when they say "done"?

Well, of course, what they meant by that question, was their presumption that at some point, with enough training (this idea being reinforced by Hollywood), they would eventually transform into a certifiable butt kicker, capable of defeating any opponent with skills that need not ever be practiced again but will be retained with perfect clarity once learned. Yeah, that! When do I get to that point??

Of course, that's not quite how it works. Karate is an art form that must be continually practiced in order to retain the skills. And skillful it was. The techniques were complex – bend your knees at this angle, bend your hips at this angle, bend your elbows at this angle, et cetera. Like any activity performed by imperfect, fallible human beings, you're never going to get it perfectly right. Even if you're getting it ninety five percent right, there's room for improvement. There were students at our school who'd been practicing for twenty years... and those students, were in awe of the masters who had been practicing it for FORTY years. You can always keep getting a little better at it.

It's for that same reason that, although he already has a freakish talent for throwing a football, Ben Roethlisberger practices his craft for hours a day, working on his throwing mechanics. Even if his technique is ninety nine percent right,

he can still always get a little better. There are only a handful of guys in the world that can do what he does, as well as he does it. And he knows those guys – with names like Rodgers, Brees, or, sorry to have to say it, *Brady* – they’re all working just as hard, knowing they’ll never be perfect, but always working to get just a little better, knowing they’re never “done”. There’s always the possibility that today I could get just a bit better, than I was yesterday.

What does all this rambling about karate and football have to do with our faith? Well, those things remind me a little of our faith journey. You’re never done. Because we’re all broken, fallible, imperfect people, we’re always striving for the perfection towards which God has called us but knowing that thanks to sin we’ll never quite get there. That’s the journey of our faith.

In a similar vein to the kid asking when he’s going to be “done” with karate, I’ve heard some folks half kiddingly ask: “Pastor Scott sure does talk a lot about transformation in his sermons... how do I know when I’m done transforming and what I’m transforming into?”

Well, can you look me in the eye and tell me that you are the fully actualized child of God you were born to be? Living your life selflessly for others in service, fulfilling all your potential, putting all your skills to use for the Kingdom, with no brokenness left to heal, no more personal growth to be had, and nothing left to improve? No more demons in the closet to be brought out into the light?

Well, then, you’re not done transforming yet. When will you be? Probably around five seconds after they close the lid on you. Until then, you’re never “done”. That’s the journey of faith.

And, if this is the case for us as individuals, it’s going to be the same way for the church, right? The church is made up of individuals, so it’s going to exhibit the same characteristics. Always moving forward. Always adapting to its environment. Always growing. Always *journeying*. And if we’re not doing these things, if we’re stagnant, staying put, maintaining the same old, we don’t even realize that we’re dying.

The journey continues always. The landscape around us will change as we move. But we’re always constantly moving. Always getting a little closer to being those fully actualized children of God we were born to be, while knowing that thanks to the brokenness of sin we’re never going to quite get all the way there in *this* life, but we strive anyway because that’s what we’re called to do.

In our readings today, Moses and his father in law lead the Israelites on their trek thru the desert. Jesus walks with the disciples on the road to Emmaus. And now, we install my friend and mentor Scott as our tour guide on the journey, for the next five years. After him will come someone else, and then someone else. But we trust that God will always continue to raise up faithful women and men in leadership to be our tour guides, and take us where the Spirit is calling us.

And the only constant throughout that journey, will be *change*. Rather than fight it, we must open our hearts to new possibilities, new experiences, new life. We must be willing to embrace with open arms *resurrection, reformation, and transformation*.

So, is my ultimate message today, “Embrace the chaos?” Well, that might be a bit of an oversimplification... but, it wouldn’t be too far off. It means embracing the fact that God calls us to a living faith, which is open and welcoming to whatever awaits us further on down the road.

The old saying goes that “getting there is half the fun.” In the journey of our faith – for this mortal life, at least – getting there, is the entire point. *The journey, is an end in and of itself*. Let’s give ourselves a break and stop asking, “Are we there yet?” And instead, just enjoy the ride.

And so, we will continue to journey.

Amen.