Let us begin with gratitude for those whose
essential work goes unnoticed, unknown, or undervalued:
to Brian and John, Cathedral sextons,
for making sure the Cathedral and Founders' Hall
were ready for our worship and fellowship
and for cleaning up after us.
And for those,
here at the Convention Center,
who arrived before us
and will be here long after we leave.

I give thanks for the ministry of The Reverend Jason Shank.
I'm grateful for the time and care
he has given **and continues to offer**
to The Diocese of West Missouri and The Episcopal Church.
His faithfulness means that we know and remember
that we are members of a larger body,
the body of Christ,
who's one goal is to share the Good News of Jesus Christ.
Thank you, Father Jason,
for doing more than showing up,
thank you for leading the way!

Thank you to our diocesan staff.
Every single one of them goes above and beyond
for our diocese on the regular.
Canon Chas, Canon Anne, Canon Jose,
Emily, Zach, Ron, Elaine, Rachael, and Meredith:
thank you for offering yourself to the ministry of our diocese.
We would not be here *today* without your faithfulness.
Thank you!

And to our diocesan leadership:
thank you to members of Diocesan Council,
Standing Committee, our Chancellor and Vice-Chancellor.
These folks work hard,
offering their time and talent amid busy and full lives,
to support the ongoing ministry of the diocese.
Thank you: you are a blessing to us!

Travel back in time with me to 2016.
I was serving as the Rector
of a small parish in Danville, Kentucky.
Our children were 4, 10, and 12.
I won't tell you how old I was.
I went back and looked at my journal from November 2016.

Life was simple:
Vestry meetings, cross country meets,
and lots of four-year-old boy snuggles.

What about you:
what was your life like in 2016?
What about life in The Diocese of West Missouri in 2016?

Our archives tell us that there were 48 churches with a total ASA of 3,000 - ish.
100 people were confirmed or received that year. We have some photographic evidence
from convention that year.
Recognize anyone?

Deacon Brock Slaback and Father Jim Lile
were ordained to the diaconate at that convention.
It was, at least according to the Convention Journal,
a regular, normal convention.
There was concern
about declining assessment revenue,
rising expenses, and the draw on the endowment.

There was a “Town Hall Conversation”
on the Plan for Ministry
and *our way into the future*.

Reading through the journal of the 127th convention of The Diocese of West Missouri, I thought:
as much as things change, they stay the same.
There have been changes over the last ten years:
decline in all mainline denomination churches;
the COVID pandemic took the church out of the building and on to the internet; and I stand here as one of *two* new bishops for the diocese. **And**, our primary concern from 2016,
support for congregational vitality, especially our smallest communities, remains.

There once lived a man
who said wonderful things
and did amazing things.
Crowds of people followed him wherever he went.
As they followed him,
they heard him talking about a kingdom.

Now, it wasn't like any kingdom they had seen
or heard of
or even lived amidst.

One day, Jesus said to the crowd,
"What is the kingdom of God like?
And to what should I compare it?

It is like a mustard seed
that someone took and sowed in the garden;
it grew and became a tree,
and the birds of the air made nests in its branches"
(Luke 13: 18-19, NRSVUE).

Jesus uses the image of a mustard seed
to describe the **capacity**
of the kingdom of God.

To fuel our imaginations,
here are some images of the mustard seed.
Can you see them? Hold on – let's zoom in.
They are small, bland seeds;
not very interesting to look at.

Can you imagine what this seed will become?
What does it need to grow?

For fun, here are some images of the plant
from a mustard seed.
Large enough to be a tree?
Large enough to house nests for birds?
Would a bird really build a nest in these plants?
Why would Jesus choose a mustard seed
to describe the kingdom of God?

I have some ideas;
I'm sure you do also.

Here's something I noticed:
the seeds growth matters very little to the seed;
indeed, to grow costs the seed its very existence.
In Jesus' parable,
the seed grows for the sake of the birds,
so that ***they*** will have a place for their nests.

As with all parables, there is a lot to wonder here.
I'm curious what the parable might mean

for the future of the Episcopal Diocese of West Missouri.

Travel with me to 2036.
What will our community be like then?
Of course, we will grow older;
there will be natural change.
If we were to do nothing,
we can make some predictions.
We cannot ignore the reality that
if we do nothing,
we will have to close some churches.
The good news is:
we can **choose** to do something
or many things.
God has already imagined a future for our church in 2036;
and I wonder
how we can yoke ourselves to God's imagination.

We start with **prayer**.
I am asking you to pray for our diocese every day;
many of you already do, thank you!
Ask God to show us what God would have us do next.
Ask God to give us courage and strength.

Ask God to make us ready for the future.

We can also **imagine**.
Spend some time wondering
what our communities will be like in 2036.
Let your imagination run wild.

Imagine:

> your church doubles in size;
> your income raised by 50%;
> your Wednesday night Bible study is standing room only.

Now, can you imagine
what will happen over the next ten years
to get to **that** future?
What will you do now to prepare you for **that** future?

This **is** the future that I imagine for West Missouri.
I believe that God has a wild imagination
and offers us a hope-filled future.
I believe we can trust God
to show us the way

and give us more than what we need for that future.

I believe we must do our best to follow Jesus into the future:
even when we cannot imagine it for ourselves,
even when he asks us to take big risks,
even when it feels too hard.

Here are two things that we, the diocese,
are going to try in the next year.

We are forming three cohorts.

One will draw together congregations
that are experiencing revitalization.
We will have some specific metrics for this cohort,
including average Sunday attendance and financial stability.
These are congregations and parishes
where the leadership, community, and property
are all moving towards vitality.

Another cohort will offer support to those
who could partner with one another by region.
In other words,

they have the capacity to share resources
because they are close to one another.
St. Mary's, Fayette and Christ Church, Booneville
are already a regional cohort
and a living example of what is possible.

The third cohort will bring together
communities that are small and mighty.
These are places that are on the precipice of revitalization,
no matter their size.
This cohort will begin with a *small church summit*
that will offer some coaching on practices
that build confidence and support vitality.

More information about these cohorts will be coming to you
in email and on the website.
If you're already interested or know where your community
belongs, speak with Canon Chas or me.
Between now and Epiphany,
we will begin inviting communities
to participate in these cohorts.

I am asking you to ***make yourself ready***

to accept the invitation.
Commit now to accepting what God may offer you
with these cohorts.

At the same time,
Diocesan Council has begun a strategic planning process.
To the over 300 people who completed the survey, thank you!
Your participation gives us valuable data
about who we are right now.

In addition, the listening sessions
are offering us insight into the needs and desires
of our members.
In May of 2027,
we will share with the diocese
a strategic plan with measurable goals
for 2028, 2030, and 2032.

Along with possibilities for congregational vitality,
we will have a financial strategy for the diocese.
The strategic plan will not be put in a binder
and placed on the shelf in the archives.
We will create a working document

that will guide us as we follow Jesus into the future.

Now, I want to offer you some ideas
that may seem risky or unimaginable.
These are real possibilities, things we *can* do.
We do not have to do them;
these are ideas to fuel our imaginations
as to what is possible.

What if we paid off the mortgage for St. Mary Magdalene in Belton? This relief would put $4000 back into their monthly budget.

What if we forgave every "debt" owed to the diocese?
How would freedom from that debt move our communities towards ministry?

What if the diocese committed to subsidizing the cost of clergy in our diocese? This could mean funding health care costs, raising a part-time priest to full time,
or placing a full-time priest where there are currently only supply clergy.

What if we doubled our endowment over the next ten years?

What can we offer the next generation of leaders?
What will we need then and how can we create those resources now?
Let us choose to build a future church

that is confident in God's abundance,
hopeful in the name of Jesus,
and rooted in the power of the Spirit.

Here's the truth: I do not know what the future holds.
I do know that I'm grateful to be moving towards the future **with you**.

Each one of our members of all our communities matter to me. It is because of **you**, **your** faithfulness,
that we are able to tend to God's kingdom
here in West Missouri; indeed, the kingdom of God is very near to us.

Let us trust that by the power of the Spirit and in the name of Jesus, God will lead us right to where God wants us. Amen.