

Report of the Bishop
East Central Synod of Wisconsin
2009

“God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.”
(Psalm 46:1)

By many reports we are living in ‘troubled’ times.

- ~The U.S. economy is weakened.
- ~Jobs are being threatened or lost.
- ~Budgets are tight.
- ~Beloved buildings are costly to maintain.
- ~Members come and go and we wonder if we can carry on.

The Psalmist calls to us in faith; *not* to wish for untroubled times, but to turn our attention to God. ***“Be still, and know that I am God!”*** (Psalm 46:10)

This is not a sweet little reminder to set aside a few moments for prayer. (Although that can be helpful along life’s way as well.) This is a call to *wake up!* The Psalmist challenges you and me to remember that: ***“The Lord of hosts is with us...”*** (Psalm 46:7, 11)

In the midst of a shaky economy we remember that our souls are not saved by economies or human institutions. We are saved by grace through faith in our Risen Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. When jobs are lost, loved ones die or when hope is hard to come by we are comforted by a God who loved the world enough to send Christ into our midst. He came, not as a conquering earthly ‘hero’ but as an Everlasting Counselor and the Prince of Peace.

Jesus spoke often about the danger of relying on wealth and money to make us happy. He invites us to open our hearts to God who can fill them with the desire to serve, pray, worship and share our gifts even when finances seem tight. As much as our buildings mean to us they are *not* the church. As the old children’s song goes: *“I am the church, you are the church, we are the church together.”* Jay Beech, a well known church musician, echoes: *“We are the church. The body of our Lord. We are all God’s children and we have been restored!”*

Challenges are nothing new. Alvin Rogness, who served as President of Luther Seminary some years ago, reminds us: *“God has put us here for this hour. We have work to do. Putting aside our fears...we live in a today throbbing with opportunities for service...”*

You and I were baptized for this time.

You and I are forgiven and freed from sin and death for this time.

And if this time is troubled, you and I will carry on: with faith that moves mountains,
grace that changes lives, kindness that strengthens weary hearts, peace that passes
human understanding and hope that cannot die.

“I have indeed received much joy and encouragement from your love...”

(Philemon 1:7)

A Mighty Fortress Is Our God

This beautiful hymn, written by Martin Luther, calls to us across the years to place our hope in God through Jesus Christ our Risen Lord. It is a wonderful legacy that combines Scripture with music to stir our hearts.

“With all my heart I would extol the precious gift of God in the noble art of music...Music is to be praised as second only to the Word of God because by her emotions all are swayed.” (Luther)

Reflecting the confidence of the Psalmist who authored Psalm 46 Luther’s hymn (as translated by Frederick Hedge) encourages each one of us to lift our hearts and souls in service to Jesus Christ through the power of God’s Holy Spirit.

*A mighty fortress is our God, a bulwark never failing;
Our helper frees us from the flood of mortal ills prevailing.
For still our ancient foe, forsworn to work us woe,
With guile and dreadful might, is armed to wage the fight:
On earth there is no equal.* (Verse 1)

On turning to God...

I remember standing with my Uncle Merlin before a field crushed by hail. The damage done to a small farmer and his family was devastating to say the least. I asked simply: “*What are you going to do?*” His response, one of the most powerful sermons I’ve ever heard, was this: “*I don’t know. But God will see us through.*”

I have had the privilege of meeting hundreds of faith-filled saints over the years. Like my Uncle Merlin, they have learned to look to God before everything else in life. None of them have been perfect, pain-free, famous, rich or powerful in the eyes of the world. All of them understood that without God, life would never be complete.

While our dear brother Martin loved to imagine Satan as a real and present devil, the devils before us this day are much more subtle and veiled in ‘shades of grey.’

~One person doesn’t like the sharing of ‘the peace.’ A ruckus is created. The person either leaves in a huff or refuses financial support. Is the issue here about ‘the peace’ of God or the need for *me* to get *my* way?

~Two nations strive against one another. Both claim the other is the ‘devil’ in the way of peace. Both teach their children and their grandchildren to hate and distrust the other. Is the issue about imagined ‘devils’ or the need to have *my* nation and *my* people come out on top while the others are to be crushed?

~Discussions before our ELCA, both big and small, get heated quickly when certainty replaces humility before God and others. I am amazed at how many people know God's will these days, especially in such specific ways in matters before us. When things get hot, humility before God and others is one of the first casualties. Are we called to be 'the communion of saints' (and also a rag-tag collection of sinners needing saving?) or a collection of egos driven by personal convictions?

The First Commandment, *You shall have no other Gods*, guides us past the need for *me* and *I* and back to God.

"See to it that you let me alone be your God, and never seek another...Whatever good thing you lack, look to me for it and seek it from me, and whenever you suffer misfortune and distress, come and cling to me. I am the only one who will satisfy you and help you out of every need. Only let your heart cling to no one else."

"Let us therefore learn the first commandment well and realize that God will tolerate no presumption and no trust in any other object; he makes no greater demand of us than a hearty trust in him for all blessings."

"Where the heart is right with God, and this commandment is kept, fulfillment of all the others will follow of its own accord." (All three quotes from Luther's *Large Catechism*)

What would it mean to turn to God?

While there are varied choices that could guide us well, these ten stand out for me.

#10-You and I will seek to worship God in every time and season. We will understand that we need God at the center of all that we do and not merely for one hour in worship and in a few quickened prayers before we eat and sleep.

#9-You and I will worship with others regularly. We will stop making excuses for our own convenience and we will see the need for the gathering of the community of saints. We will come, not because we *'have to'* but because *'we need and want'* that community.

#8-You and I will come to worship asking not: *"What will I get out of it?"* but *"What can I put into it?"* We will come to cry, laugh, moan, pray and sing unto the Lord our God and in the name of God's Son, Jesus Christ. We will learn together to let go of our individual wants, demands, needs and rules to be present before our God in humble adoration.

#7-You and I will learn to worship God-not leaders, traditions, organs, buildings, causes, opinions, Wall Street or Main Street-God. We will learn together to ask faithfully: *"What is God calling us to do?"*

#6-You and I will study God's Word with others. We will seek to listen to differing views and other's ideas. Together, we will pray that God's Holy Spirit guides us to understanding and community in Christ along the way.

#5-You and I will learn the importance of silence and reflection as we ponder God's Word. We will understand that some of the greatest movements of God's Holy Spirit begin in contemplation and prayer.

#4-You and I will seek to value the words "we" and "us" more than the words "I" and "me." We have followed the culture of self-focus far too long.

#3-You and I will remember the central nature of discipleship is servant hood not: power, control, status, popularity, authority or personal gain. We will seek to live out Luther's call: "*Christians live, suffer, and do everything for each other as members of one body...This is the community of the holy.*"

#2-You and I will remind ourselves that Jesus reached out to people who were not on the 'A' list for congregational membership. He touched the unclean, ate with tax-collectors, honored a woman of ill-repute, forgave those who murdered him, shared his last meal with twelve betrayers, stared down demons, died between thieves and welcomed the unwelcome. Paul Althaus, a Luther translator, comments: "*Luther repeatedly emphasized...bearing the weakness and sin of the brother...Here he felt the pulse and innermost heart of Christ's love and therefore also of Christian love.*"

#1-You and I will learn to trust the promise of God. We will move away from the fears that bind us and seek to free our hearts and lives in the hope of salvation in Jesus Christ. So that like my Uncle Merlin and countless saints we might say in the darkest days: "*I don't know...But God will see us through.*"

*If we in our own strength confide, our striving turns to losing;
The righteous one fights by our side, the one of God's own choosing.
You ask who this may be; Christ Jesus it is he,
The Lord of hosts by name. No other God we claim!
None else can win the battle." (Verse 2)*

On Reclaiming the Lutheran Christian Testimony of Grace...

There are two Sacraments in our church. The Sacrament of Holy Baptism and the Sacrament of Holy Communion. Both Sacraments remind us that God is the actor and we are the receivers of God's grace through Christ.

In Baptism, we see most clearly God's gracious love. When the infant, toddler or adult comes to the font, they are welcomed and surrounded by God's love. Fame, riches, status, family lines and intelligence have no bearing on the promise of God to those who are baptized. For here, at the font, God says: "***Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name and you are mine.***" (Isaiah 43:1)

In *The Small Catechism* Luther says: Baptism “*effects forgiveness of sins, delivers from death and the devil, and grants eternal salvation to all who believe, as the Word and promise of God declare.*”

A non-Lutheran minister once teased: “*Why do you Lutherans baptize babies? A baby has no clue what is going on.*” Exactly! We do not come to faith by our own strength and reason. We come to faith through the mercy and power of God’s Holy Spirit.

In Holy Communion, we see most clearly God’s gracious love. When we move toward the altar, laying down our sins along the way, we remember these beautiful words from Ephesians: “***But God, who is rich in mercy, out of great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together in Christ-by grace you have been saved-and raised us up with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.***” (Vss. 4-7)

Martin Luther speaks from *The Small Catechism*: “*...The forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation are given to us in the sacrament, for where there is forgiveness of sins, there are also life and salvation.*”

In a time when many of us are shaping ministries and programs around: worship styles, locations, liturgies, traditions, non-traditions, current trends, historic patterns, popular authors, respected theologians and ‘successful gurus’ what do you think would happen if our ministries and programs were shaped by God’s amazing grace? What would our church look like if we did that?

I think we would see a church that...

- ~Spends more time on feeding the hungry than arguing.
- ~Welcomes those who are hurting instead of judging those who might be ‘wrong.’
- ~Cares more about widows and orphans than buildings and programs.
- ~Looks to the future instead of focusing on the past.
- ~Honors God’s Word and the Confessions more than ‘trendy experts.’
- ~Changes the neighborhoods they are in rather than being forgotten in the neighborhoods they are in.
- ~Cares as it has been cared for...
- ~Shares as it has been blessed...
- ~Forgives as it has been forgiven...
- ~Loves as it has been loved.

For “*The church is not wood and stone but the group of people who believe in Christ...The church is thus the group which has been gathered together through the gospel and therefore is also gathered around the gospel.*” (Martin Luther)

If we are in a time of challenge-so be it! We are not left to hopelessness no matter what we face as a church. The life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ represent a victory that is won! Our souls and our hearts belong to God in Christ. Together, filled with God’s grace, we can let go of our fears and cling tenaciously to God’s undying love.

***“For by grace you have been saved through faith,
And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God.”***

(Ephesians 2:8)

*God’s Word shall stand above the pow’rs, shall end all their thanksgiving.
The Spirit and the gifts are ours, for God with us is living.
Let goods and kindred go, this mortal life also;
Though all of these be gone, they yet have nothing won.
The kingdom’s ours forever!*

On Living and Serving Through our Gifts...

The study Bible I use comments on Ephesians 2:8 this way:

We become Christians through God’s unmerited grace, not as the result of any effort, ability, intelligent choice, or act of service on our part. However, out of gratitude for this free gift, we will seek to help and serve others with kindness, charity, and goodness, and not merely to please ourselves. While no action or work we do can help us obtain salvation, God’s intention is that our salvation will result in works of service. We are not saved merely for our own benefit but to serve him and build up the church. (Life Application Bible NRSV)

Article 20 of *The Augsburg Confession* adds:

“It is also taught among us that good works should and must be done, not that we are to rely on them to earn grace but that we may do God’s will and glorify him.”

The writer of Ephesians proclaims:

“Each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ’s gift... The gifts that he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ..” (Vss. 7, 11-12)

Joy and I have preached an installation sermon that has two, simple points:

- #1) Pastor, love your people. People, love your pastor.
- #2) Pastor, look for the best in your people. People, look for the best in your pastor.

We have noticed that congregations that are experiencing conflict or that might just be ‘stuck’ have a hard time claiming their gifts for ministry. Instead, they fall into the unhealthy pattern of focusing on their ‘deficits.’ We have not seen a congregation get healthy unless this changes dramatically.

Conversely, we have noticed that congregations that are doing well show the simple ability to focus on their 'assets' and gifts. They seem to be able to get past the struggles that every group faces and focus instead on mission, ministry and the sharing of their gifts for the world in the name of Jesus Christ.

Particularly in this time of challenge it is good and necessary for us to offer our gifts to our communities and our world. To do that, it would be wise to discern the gifts that are among us and allow every person the freedom to serve, using their best gifts for ministry.

As an individual we can raise prayerful questions.

- ~What gifts has God given me that I could use for others?
- ~What gifts bring me the greatest joy in service?
- ~What gifts do I have that are needed just now?
- ~How can I make a difference with the gifts God has given me?
- ~What are the gifts others see in me?

As a community our questions might be...

- ~What is God calling us to do here?
- ~How can we reach out beyond our walls to the community outside our doors?
- ~Where are the hurts and pains in the world we can address?
- ~Who is not here and how could we welcome them?
- ~How can we create an environment where the best gifts of our members are freely shared for the benefit of all?

It also is wise to remember that people often have gifts that are obvious yet they are gifts that they would rather set aside for other interests.

Example 'A':

Ron is a gifted CPA. Although he is willing to serve as Treasurer this is not the gift that makes his heart sing for joy. Ron would really like to work with the Mission Trip groups that make several trips each year to serve sisters and brothers in need.

Example 'B':

Sue is a gifted leader in the business community. She works through difficult negotiations every week. While she is willing to serve on the personnel Committee she would rather help in planning a new worship opportunity for the congregation.

Example 'C':

Carol is an experienced engineer. She's a natural for the Property Committee. However, her greatest delight would be to sing in the choir and help arrange for special music in worship.

Now is always a wonderful time to focus on lifting up the gifts of all sisters and brothers in Christ. *Now* is always the best time to shape your programs and ministries around the best talents of those around you. *Now* is always an opportunity to learn, grow and shape our mission and our discipleship in Christ through the gifts of God's Holy Spirit.

In his *Apology of The Augsburg Confession* Philip Melanchthon writes:

“We have already given ample evidence that good works must necessarily follow faith. We do not overthrow the law, Paul says (Romans 3:31), but uphold it; for when we have received the Holy Spirit by faith, the keeping of the law necessarily follows, by which love, patience, chastity, and other fruits of the Spirit gradually increase.” (Article 20)

One of the greatest privileges Joy and I have in our service is to see the power of the people of God serving their congregations, communities and the world with their gifts. We have seen...

- ~Quilters who send hundreds of quilts to those in need.
- ~Youth choirs sharing their musical at local Care Facilities.
- ~Small groups making sure volunteers help with meals at The Salvation Army.
- ~Mission Builders put up a new building to save money for local congregations.
- ~Volunteers cleaning and working at our camps.
- ~Teachers guiding our kids in Sunday and Bible Schools.
- ~Generous helpers of all ages planning mission trips.
- ~Gifted teachers and students in our two Lay Schools.
- ~Family groups working together at the local Food Pantry.
- ~Local volunteers planning fund raisers for families in need.
- ~Experienced business men and women helping those who have lost their jobs.
- ~Dedicated pastors, associates in ministry, diaconal ministers and deaconesses.
- ~Talented musicians and worship assistants.
- ~Powerful ‘prayer chain’ ministries.
- ~Vigilant efforts for justice and peace.
- ~Council members who lead with care and passion.
- ~Committee members who want the best for all concerned.
- ~‘Fired up’ mission teams reaching out to the unchurched.
- ~Congregations that truly welcome and support new members.
- ~Mentors and chaperones who spend time passing on the faith.

As God reminded Abraham: ***“I will bless you...so that you will be a blessing,”*** (Genesis 12:2) so we are reminded. You and I have been blessed with gifts for service that are echoed by the promises we ask of those confirming their faith. (p.236 ELW)

You have made public profession of your faith. Do you intend to continue in the covenant God made with you in holy baptism:

- *to live among God’s faithful people,*
- *to hear the word of God and share in the Lord’s supper,*
- *to proclaim the good news of God in Christ through word and deed,*
- *to serve all people, following the example of Jesus,*
- *and to strive for justice and peace in all the earth?*

May God grant you and me the strength and conviction to respond with vigor...

“I do! And I ask God to help and guide me.”