



Southwestern Pennsylvania Synod Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

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A Pastoral Word Following Las Vegas ... and Puerto Rico ... and Florida and Houston ... and Mexico City and Chiapas ... and Charlottesville ...

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Dear People of the Southwestern Pennsylvania Synod,

The grace and peace of our Lord Jesus be with you.

Habakkuk opens his book of prophecy with a wail:

**O Lord, how long shall I cry for help,
and you will not listen?
Or cry to you "Violence!"
and you will not save?
Why do you make me see wrongdoing
and look at trouble?
Destruction and violence are before me;
strife and contention arise.**

We find these ancient words so familiar today, because they give voice to the grief and sorrow and soul-sickness of our hearts. Destruction and violence are all around us these days, as they were in the days of Habakkuk. The devastation of natural disaster threatens from one side, and the calamity of cruel human behavior lays siege from the other. Above and beneath both, the prevailing climate of strife and contention only makes matters worse, as the words of comfort and actions of relief victims look for are pushed aside in the inevitable rush to parade political or social agendas.

It is small comfort, if it is any comfort at all, to think that these days are not at all unfamiliar to the people of God. Even so, we do find encouragement in the words and hymns and actions of our faith ancestors, the fruit of their own terrific struggles with life gone terribly wrong.

One such hymn opened each academic year when I was a student at Trinity Seminary in Columbus, Ohio: *God of Grace and God of Glory*. (LBW 415; ELW 705) In the second verse of that hymn we sang this powerful prayer, “Grant us wisdom, grant us courage, for the living of these days, for the living of these days.”

What is it about wisdom and courage that provide for the *living* of these days, and not the *enduring* of them only?

Wisdom

Holy Scripture teaches us that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. Wisdom begins with the posture of looking out beyond personal experience, out beyond communal human experience, to the one who created and redeems us. Wisdom gives us distance from the press of the moment to see the larger picture of God’s redemption of a fallen creation. We think of the witness of Acts 7:54-60, where we read that Stephen, even as he was being stoned to death, saw a vision of the Lord’s final redemption of all things and responded to violence with a prayer of forgiveness. Wisdom helps us to live these days by seeing that the violence and destruction of these days do not define who we are, nor do they determine our future.

Courage

In Matthew 14:27, we read that Jesus came to his disciples, walking on the sea, and called out to them through the storm, “Take courage, it is I; do not be afraid.” Courage gives attention to the very specific moment of trauma, and works to bring hope into it. Courage addresses the foe. Courage faces the enemy. An act of courage declares that these people, facing this crisis, are worth our concentrated attention, response, care, and effort. Their lives matter. Courage helps us to live these days by naming every act of support and kindness and advocacy meaningful, worthwhile, and a defining characteristic of who we are.

With violence and destruction on every side, I pray God bless each of us with wisdom and courage for the living of these days. With the psalmist may we learn to say, “We will not fear though the earth be moved.” (Psalm 46:2) And with our Lord Jesus may we learn to say, “I have compassion for the crowd.” (Mark 8:2)

Let us come to the aid of those in need, with gifts of financial help and with bold voices of advocacy. And let us do so with the confidence that it is not our work, but the work of our Lord Jesus, which finally redeems the world.

With you in Christ,



Kurt F. Kusserow, Bishop