

Dear Friends in Christ,

Over these past months we have repeatedly heard the euphemistic catchphrase, “The new normal,” as in “We’re living in the new normal.” No we’re not. This isn’t *the new normal*. Though most are fearful of what is happening and what’s to come, if you have any knowledge of history then you know that pandemics or plagues, as well as hatred, confrontation and killing have always been a part of that history. The propensity of humans to enter into such horrible situations is **the old abnormal** of sin. This causes most to be very afraid.

I recall the first time the words of verse 120 from our text really hit and hit hard: “My flesh trembles for fear of you, and I am afraid of your judgments.” *Tremble. Afraid.* I thought a lot about that verse. Still do. I think about where I was before Christ entered my life, and what would have happened if I had died. I think about the battles and failures with the sin that is still there.

Maybe what I’ve put in front of you can lose its force when we hear Jesus speak from the cross: “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” (Lk. 23:34) Yet the Holy Spirit gave us such Scriptures as our text for good and sound reasons. Let’s examine . . .

THE TIME TO TREMBLE AND BE AFRAID

I. The Gift We Have Received.

Let’s spend a few moments considering what the Lord said from Proverbs 6 and see if we fit anywhere:

There are six things that the Lord hates, seven that are an abomination to him: (1) haughty eyes (Ever looked down on someone or others? Thought yourself better?), (2) a lying tongue (how many little, or medium sized, or big ugly lies have flown out of our mouths?), and (3) hands that shed innocent blood (Remember I John 3:15?: “Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him), (4) a heart that devises wicked plans (Have we, ever?), (5) feet that make haste to evil (We know something we’re pursuing is wrong, but we pursue it anyway.), (6) a false witness who breathes out lies (Which involves lying or gossiping about, or slandering someone. Are we ever guilty?), and (7) one who sows discord among brothers (More lying, gossiping, slandering, manipulating!). (vv. 16-19)

It’s just as Scriptures say: “The Lord looks down from heaven on the children of man...They have all turned aside...there is none who does good, not even one.” (Ps. 14:2-3) That describes all humanity. But the miraculous love of God was there on the Cross bleeding and pleading and paying for our sin. All of it! And Jesus made and keeps the promise: “Whoever believes...is not condemned...” (Jn. 3:18) And John writes: “...the blood of Jesus (God’s) Son cleanses us from all unrighteousness.” (I Jn. 1:7)

When I think about those words, “there is none who does good, not even one,” I think about and refuse to let Ephesians 2:8 & 9 ever fade in its importance: “For by grace (God’s undeserved love) you have been saved through faith (Faith in Christ’s payment for every sin!). And this is not your own doing (we did nothing to make ourselves worthy!); it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.” I think about those words with great consistency because if I set them aside, the only things left for me at the end of my life span will be torment and wailing and gnashing of teeth!

I think about that more than anyone can imagine. And, many times, I cry deep within because of the sin that is still there. Don’t you? I confess with Paul: “For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out.” (Rom. 7:18) And I cry with joy the Scripture that I can’t repeat enough for you and me: “There is therefore now no

condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” (Rom. 8:1) Am I repetitious? I pray so! There is not one thing of this world of greater importance than, or equal to, what we have been given from Jesus Who loved us to death and gave us His life!!

II. What Happens to Those Who Reject. (vv. 118-119)

This takes us back to verses 118 and 119 of our text:

You spurn all who go astray from your statutes, for their cunning is in vain.
All the wicked of the earth you discard like dross, therefore I love your testimonies.

This is all that's left for those who reject God's love in Christ. First, to be spurned! To be spurned is defined as “to be rejected with disdain or contempt.” It's hearing Jesus say to your face, “I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.” (Matt. 7:23) Second, to be marked as “dross.” Dross defined is “something regarded as worthless...in particular scum formed on the surface of metal.” Scum! Again, our text, “the wicked of the earth you discard like dross” - scum! Doesn't that cause our flesh to tremble; to fear His judgements?

We've explored this before: Many will ask, “If God is love how could He possibly let bad things happen to good people? How could He send people to hell?” Of course, such questions are based on the premise that people are basically good and worthy of God's love. They're based on the inability or refusal to grasp that *dross* - *scum* - sees no need of God; exploits and hurts and destroys others.

The question that never makes it to the front of the line, where it deserves to be, is this: “If people are basically good and deserving of God's love then why do they think, say and do all the evil, rotten, foul things they (We!) think, say and do?” And let's face it, for the most part the only places for Jesus in the public arena are mockery and verbal filth! It's quite clear: “You spurn all who go astray from your statutes...”.

Do you remember the New Testament Church account of Ananias and Sapphira who made a vow to God to sell land and give the proceeds to help the poor? And they broke the vow. When confronted with their deceit and lying to God they fell down and died. Afterward, we're told: “And great fear came upon the church and upon all who heard these things.” (Acts 5:11) We recall this word of God from the Book of Hebrews; “It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.” (Heb. 10:31) There is a time to tremble and be afraid.

III. Therefore We Tremble and Are Afraid.

So, let's back up to the first verse of our text, verse 117: “Hold me up, that I may be safe and have regard for your statutes continually!” To disregard God's statutes is the road to being spurned and discarded. At the same time, none of us can walk away from the confession, “I a poor miserable sinner.” None of us can step outside the reality of Paul's confession, “For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out.” (Rom. 7:18b) And we can't ignore Jesus' warning: “And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him (God) who can destroy both soul and body in hell.” (Matt. 10:28)

And here's where the comfort starts; God's Word through Isaiah: “But this is the one to whom I will look: he who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at my word.” (Is. 66:2) God's word through David: “The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.” (Ps. 51:17) God's Word through John: “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” (I Jn. 1:8-9)

Our Lutheran Confessions teach:

...faith gradually grows and throughout life it struggles with sin to conquer sin and death. But love follows faith... Filial fear (that is, fear that a child gives to a parent) can be clearly defined as an anxiety joined with faith, where faith consoles and sustains the anxious heart (that is, filial faith respects and fears the parent, but always grasps the great love and forgiveness of a loving parent), whereas in servile fear (slavish fear of punishment) faith does not sustain the anxious heart." (Tapper, *Book of Concord*, pp. 186.37-187.38)

Our sermon hymn, "Upon the Cross Extended", painted a clear, beautiful picture for us; the 5th verse:

Your soul in griefs unbounded, Your head with thorns surrounded, You died to ransom me. The cross for me enduring, the crown for me securing, You healed my wounds and set me free.

Though we so frequently flounder and fail, for the sake of Jesus our Father in Heaven loves and forgives. The 6th verse of that hymn brings it all together:

Your cords of love, my Savior, Bind me to You forever, I am no longer mine.
To You I gladly tender All that my life can render And all I have to You resign.

All of it - everything God gives to me through Christ - directs my feet on the path to eternal life.
All of it - everything God gives me in Christ - causes me to tremble.

Amen.

Pastor Bill Abbott

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Psalm 119:117-120:

“The Time to Tremble and Be Afraid”

- I. The Gift We Have Received.
- II. What Happens to Those Who Reject. vv. 118-119.
- III. Therefore We Tremble and Are Afraid.

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