



January 25 – After the storm

I remember quite vividly the first time I experienced an earthquake. It was the middle of the night while I was living in San Bernardino. I woke up to the sound of the windows rattling and the whole house shaking. I went to check on Arturo and he yelled, "Grab the TV." I stood there holding the TV on the stand until it passed. The next day, I processed the experience talking with others, as this was a new experience. That was met with, "I would rather have earthquakes than tornados." I have been through one other earthquake, watched a minor volcano eruption, and talked with friends preparing for a hurricane. All of them had the same reaction when I spoke with them, "I would rather have this than a tornado."

Well, anyone who has lived in the Midwest for a while has experience with tornados. They are frightening. The sky gets black and you cannot see anything. Often, methods for communication fail, whether phone lines or cell reception. I find myself thinking about the tornado in St. Peter, MN in 1998. That was my Dad's hometown and both of his parents were still living there. All the phone lines were down. There was no way of knowing if they were okay. My Dad and I left before the sun came up to drive to St. Peter and try to check on them.

Many of you can imagine what we found as we got there. Almost all the trees were down. Utility poles were snapped. The roads were filled with well-intentioned people and others who just wanted to take in the spectacle. The senior centers that they lived in were unharmed. The town, however, was a disaster area. It was no longer dark, and in the light, you could see the difficult path ahead.

That is the type of image that the prophet Isaiah speaks to the people. It is a time of anguish and uncertainty. It is darkness where it is difficult to see exactly how much damage there has been. It is a time of survival. Then, a light appears. The sun begins to shine, and you can start to see the extent of the damage and the difficult path forward.

It is fitting for Jesus to quote these words from the prophet. He is at the start of his ministry, and it is a dark time. The land is under the thumb of Rome, which was no longer in the glory days of the Republic. It was under the authoritarian rule of Tiberius. The text begins with the nonchalant reference to arrest of John, Jesus' cousin. These arrests had become so common place that the writers did not need to elaborate. Anyone who was seen as a threat to the empire would be arrested, and many were executed. This is the same fate that would be in store for Jesus and 10 of the disciples, being named a domestic terrorist and executed.

Jesus quotes Isaiah, and it is fitting. The prophet speaks this word of hope to a people who are living in a false sense of security. It is a word of hope for them to remember in the future. These early chapters of Isaiah are written before the exile, before everything fall apart. They are a word reminding the people to never lose hope, even when all seems lost. A light WILL shine. The light will not immediately fix the damage done. There will be a long road to recover. However, in the light you can see what needs to be done.

The journey in St. Peter was a long one. It took a lot of work. The community rallied. New partnerships were formed as the prior divides drifted away. One example was a church up on the hill, which was renamed "First Lutheran Catholic Church." The Catholic Church had sustained major damage so they moved in with the Lutheran Church. With nearly 500 years of division in the two traditions, they saw a new path forward as the light began to shine. My Dad had left Catholicism when we married a Missouri Synod Lutheran. We celebrated his parents' lives in worship at a Lutheran Catholic Church with pictures of both Martin Luther and the Pope in the fellowship hall.

Friends, these feel like dark times. These are dark times. There is great uncertainty in the world, in our country, in our own neighborhoods. Take heart in this text. There is a light that will shine. It does not mean that it will be an easy path. There will be a lot of healing that will need to take place. If the Catholics and Lutherans can find a path forward, together, when the light shone after the darkness, we are not without hope. The manufactured divides in the world around us fade when there is light, and we begin the work of rebuilding. May we keep our focus on what God asks of us. To love God and love one another. And, as the path forward becomes visible, may we all be willing to set aside differences and work together to clean up the mess. As Midwesterners, we know how to do this. Maybe it is our time to lead the way. Amen.

Pastor Michael Schmidt