



There is much for us to be proud on this Reformation Sunday, and not just for the one German over 500 years ago who just wanted to have a conversation about the very protocols of the church that you were never supposed to question. Or that same German who was a man of the people and ventured out to the local establishments and was so enamored with the beer drinking songs that he would convert them into some of the most memorable hymns of our entire church history that we still sing to this day. We

have much to be proud of for over 500 years of Lutheran operations not just in Europe but on this side of the pond as well, to say the least. However, we should also be incredibly proud of what is happening now, of the very ministries of our Divinity family and the wider church reaching all over the world: that we are so enamored with a God of the most amazing grace made possible through the gift of faith in the Christ who was willing to die and live for us still, so caught up in that joyous Gospel that we cannot help ourselves but join in sharing the life-altering love near and far away.

Many of those ministries were shown earlier this morning, but one was left out. It is one that tends to come up in congregation announcements all over our Evangelical Lutheran Church in America the Sunday after some natural catastrophe hits. And it might stay in bulletins and newsletters for a time or two, but then it gets pushed off by the wayside as happens often with the most wonderful ministries; that we do not realize the most marvelous impact being done until we need it for ourselves. And yet, when Lutheran Disaster Response fades away from congregation announcements and bulletins and newsletters, that is exactly when their extraordinary work ensues. For Lutheran Disaster Response has developed a world-wide reputation amongst non-profits and social service agencies as one of the last groups to ever leave the scene of natural disaster. And so, for what has happened to our siblings in Christ in the southeast of this country, the incredible work is just beginning: in a place that got to know the words of the 46th Psalm far too intimately, where the waters raged and foamed over their beloved homeland.

One of the places struck by the recent hurricanes was Asheville, North Carolina, 400 miles inland, and yet many homes and businesses absolutely devastated. So, I want to share with you one account from an ELCA sibling in Christ from that state. He wrote earlier this month:

[A]s a father, grandfather, and in-law to eight much-beloved people in Asheville...as a cradle Lutheran born at the base of the mountain in nearby Lenoir; as a deep lover of both [Lutheran camps in this state annihilated as well], and simply as a human being, I cannot stop lifting up my eyes to the hills, [to] our mountains. Even more, to all of our precious ones whose families, livelihoods, property, shelter, and hope itself have been decimated. Indeed, some have even lost their lives.

Imagine how you might feel if your house, your home, were completely gone. If in this age of instant and constant communication, it's [still] been days since you've heard from loved ones to see if they're okay or to tell them that you are. Or that you aren't...And yes, I personally know several people whose entire house was swept away.

And you're reading the horror stories on social media from the few in those areas who can post anything and seeing on the news a constant litany of horror and tragedy stories deeper than we stunned bystanders can fathom. Down through the washed-out valleys and ravaged hollers of our beloved Carolina mountains, their haunting cry echoes, "[Where is our refuge and strength?]"

There's one congregation member with cancer, kids still at home, having to abandon their [house] squashed by trees and [four feet] of water inside, [and yet they're] gushing about the kindness they've received from the [local] Holiday Inn staff. For our own daughter-in-law in Asheville who, on the fifth try of ways to get to her job as an Emergency Department physician... persevered and finally got there

and worked 21 straight hours because others scheduled after her couldn't get there—all with no x-rays and other electronic tests. And dozens, hundreds, already like her. For the convoy of utility trucks and linemen rolling in...from Texas. [Perhaps in them is a sign of our refuge and strength.] I've heard from so many looking at the devastation [and they say] that "I feel so helpless." [But] I know where you can find help in recovering from this storm. Look in the mirror! [For in you is a living extension of our refuge and strength]! "But what can I do?" you ask. Rather than be overwhelmed with all you can't fix right now, do what you can do. [One of our beloved Lutherans in] Garrison Keillor used to say, "You can only do so much. But you have to do that much."

Yes, those of us over 500 miles away can only do so much, but your collective generous contribution of nearly \$4000 will certainly help those who endured the most raging waters drastically altering their lives; as a most precious reminder to all of our siblings in Christ in the southeast of this country that this refuge and strength of ours in Jesus Christ will insist that absolutely no one goes through any tumult of this life alone.

So, as much Lutheran pride as we have on this day, we still cannot promise that the waters are going to stop raging and the mountains are going to stop shaking whether around us or within us, for that matter. We cannot promise that no matter if you are baptized in a Lutheran church and confirmed and married and you've served on however many committees and you memorized Martin Luther anything along the way, we cannot promise that if you are the most die-hard Lutheran or Christian at all, that this life will be without any tumult. Because the waters are still going to rage and the mountains are still going to shake, around and within us. But we can promise the ultimate refuge and strength in Jesus Christ who will never be shaken around or within you. We can promise you a church who will do everything in its grace-believing power to be the place and people you can turn to when you've hit absolute rock bottom and join you in your most joyous moments and everything in between. We can promise you the most selfless people who are not interested in receiving national headline news praise, who won't even always be recognized in church bulletins and newsletters, but will still rise to work for as long as it takes in rebuilding not just homes and properties, but the lives of all those cherished by God no matter what happens on this earth with relentless disaster.

We have so much to be proud of in over 500 years of history, but we should be just as proud for what is happening now. One of the immediate efforts of Lutheran Disaster Response may seem rather insignificant in the grand scheme of the horrible devastation, but they are children's comfort kits: a notebook and crayons and a small plush toy and bubbles in plastic shoe boxes. It may not seem like much, but for the children who lost everything too, that just might help them feel the love of their refuge and strength that is just as much for them as anyone else on this earth. Sometimes, we can only do so much, but sometimes that is the most powerful form of ministry to be done in the name of the Lord not just of a cross and resurrection but the Lord who lived for moments of embracing tears and dining with sinners. Sometimes those moments are what define not just 500 years of Lutheran church history but of humanity's entire story with God, all made possible by a refuge and strength that will never be shaken, because nothing will ever happen in this life to move the love of God in Christ Jesus from within us then, now, and forevermore. And so for that Greatest News of all not just for this Reformation celebration, but all our days, we most certainly give thanks to God, indeed! Amen!