



TRAIL THOUGHTS

TREKING TOWARD GOD'S ADVENTUROUS FUTURE

A QUARTERLY PASTORAL LETTER FROM PAUL MUNDEY, MODERATOR, CHURCH OF THE BRETHREN

FALL 2019

ANXIETY

GREETINGS IN THE STRONG NAME OF JESUS!

As we head toward Grand Rapids and the 234th Recorded Annual Conference, we rally around our conference theme: “God’s Adventurous Future.” As the theme conveys, our future is not uneventful; why, it is marked by daunting peaks, rushing currents, and foreboding valleys! Thus, there is challenge in the journey that, in all candor, can be unsettling, even anxiety-producing.

This is especially true for our journey as the church. Frankly, we live in one of the most anxious, conflicted eras in modern church history. Numerous issues not only rumble among us, they threaten us, tugging at the very fabric of our denominational being.

The way forward? Recently, I was lifted by an article by Martin E. Marty, an observer of American Religion for over eight decades. As Marty faces into the rumble-tug of the contemporary church and society at large, he advises we hold in tension two keywords: chaos and endurance.

We begin with chaos. It’s all that unsettles us, causing us to conclude: “it’s over, the ship is sinking, all is for naught!” Be candid about such reality, Marty infers, but don’t live there. Rather, he counsels us to look for the good, and endure:

“We pay attention to elementary and high school teachers who return every September to their callings, providing not only education but inspiration. To faithful worshipers who daily seek to live better lives and to make a better world...We encourage commentary on stories of daily and often unseen compassion and courage such as these—stories that do not fit neatly into the left-right binaries...precisely because it is in them that our hope for the future is found...So I leave you with the other keyword...endurance. It is a theme...we desperately need to remember as we feel the rising tides of chaos around us...[And so] I say to you...Endure!”¹

Key to enduring, in my experience, is being proactive, not reactive. My natural response when encountering an anxiety-inducing event is to stress out, rushing to quickly fix the situation. But a more God-honoring reply is to comprehend God’s Sovereignty, recognizing God’s ultimate response-ability. Only then am I able to discern, over time, my contribution as called for by the God who superintends all.

A God-ordained contribution amid anxiety, in the words of Peter Steinke, is aiming for action and not victory. This is especially relevant in anxious-conflict. For a prime mark of persons called by God are persons who provide, in the words of Steinke,

“...a way to focus and to engage...people’s imaginative capacities ...[Asking] how can we move from argument to explanation? If we don’t, we’re entangled in nothing but a trial of strength. How can we use our ingenuity to address our predicament instead of defeating the other side?”²

Steinke’s counsel is reminiscent of Jesus: “Blessed [spiritually calm with life-joy in God’s favor] are the makers and maintainers of peace, for they will [express His character and] be called the sons [and daughters] of God” (Matthew 5:9 AMP). Jesus provides a workable antidote for anxiety, as peace-building prompts blessing: spiritual calm, with life-joy in God’s favor.

This is not to deny the chaos, and the need for repentance. For a part of God’s reconciling nature is reckoning with turmoil—including sin—both personal and systemic. But if we enter God’s victory—rather than our need for victory—spiritual calm and life-joy in Christ comes. For, as the writer of Hebrews notes,

“The Son is the dazzling radiance of God’s splendor...He holds the universe together and expands it by the mighty power of his spoken word. He accomplished for us the complete cleansing of sins, and then took his seat on the highest throne at the right hand of the majestic One” (Hebrews 1:3 TPT).

And so, go figure: if Jesus takes His seat, Sovereign, on the Throne, we needn’t be Sovereign, tied up in knots either about self, others, or the church. Rather, we can:

“Let the peace of Christ rule in [our] hearts, remembering that as members of the same body [we] are called to live in harmony, and never forget to be thankful for what God has done for [us]...” (Colossians 3:15 PHILLIPS).

Sounds like a formula for endurance, no matter the chaos!

With expectation,



Paul Munday, Moderator, Church of the Brethren

Discussion Starters / Questions

1. Martin Marty names two keywords for our times: chaos and endurance. Name an example of chaos in either your personal life, the church, or larger society. Describe how you have endured, nevertheless, amid the chaos.
2. Most are reactive in anxious-conflict. Describe a time when you were proactive, aiming for action and not victory.
3. Discuss the importance of God’s Sovereignty amid anxiety, especially anxious-conflict. How does entering into God’s victory curb the temptation to achieve victory for self?
4. How does God, in Christ, hold us together? Describe a life-moment when the mighty power of God’s Word made a reconciling, transforming difference.
5. Where is God not yet Sovereign in your life? Where has the peace of Christ not yet taken over—is not ruling?

To Dig Deeper

Henry Cloud. *Integrity: The Courage to Meet The Demands of Reality*. New York: Harper, 2006.

Peter Steinke. *Congregational Leadership in Anxious Times*. Herndon: Alban Institute, 2006.

¹ Martin Marty. “Chaos and Endurance,” *Sightings*, September 9, 2019. <https://divinity.uchicago.edu/sightings/chaos-and-endurance>.

² Peter Steinke. *Congregational Leadership In Anxious Times*. Herndon: Alban Institute, 2006, p. 113.