

Proper 21 (September 28, 2014)

“Lord, Keep Us Steadfast in Your Word” (*Lutheran Service Book* #655)

“Do all things without grumbling or questioning  
that you may be blameless and innocent,  
children of God without blemish  
in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation,  
among whom you shine as lights in the world,  
holding fast to the word of life....”

Paul’s words to the Philippians in the Epistle lesson for this Sunday may bring to mind a picture of God’s children caught in an ever darkening storm, holding on for dear life to the word of life. The ship of the Church is caught in the gales brought upon by our crooked and twisted generation, and in the midst of the winds and heavy seas its passengers look out through the black night to catch a glimpse of the lighthouse to warn them back from the perilous rocks.

Martin Luther wrote this hymn in a time of great difficulty and tumult within the Empire. The Turks were steadily fighting their way into the Christian territories of the west, and the church of the Reformation itself was under attack, with the leaders of the established church ready to see the movement flounder and perish. In fact, Luther’s original first stanza to the hymn read, “Lord, keep us steadfast in thy Word / And curb the Turks’ and papists’ sword / Who Jesus Christ, thine only Son / Fain would tumble from off thy throne.”

Do we live in an age any less turbulent than Luther’s? We have threats of terrorism even here in America. School shootings are becoming almost commonplace. We read of Christians being persecuted in many extremist Muslim countries throughout the world. Often our religious freedoms are assaulted in our own country in the name of political correctness.

On a more personal level, are we threatened spiritually in our own lives? Consider the ubiquitous rowdy humor on television. Consider the instant access to internet and other media portraying pictures, language, and lifestyles far from God-pleasing. Think of the ongoing murder of unborn children in the name of a “mother’s right.” We hardly bat an eye anymore when another marriage ends in divorce.

Where do we go when we feel like drowning children, “tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes?” What can we grasp that will not let us sink, to right our craft, to keep our heads above water?

As Paul says, we hold fast to the Word, that is, Christ and His words in Holy Scripture. First of all we pray to God the Father to keep us anchored in this Word and to protect His kingdom from the schemes of the devil exhibiting themselves on a grand scale throughout the world and in more subtle ways close to home. We ask Him to make us the wise man who built his house upon the rock, and when the winds and storm came, nothing could move it. “The kingdom of God is like this,” Jesus says.

Secondly, we pray to God the Son to make his power known to defend His Church. “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me,” says Jesus. While people still question His authority, as the chief priests and elders did in His own day, Christ has been exalted so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus

Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” He is stronger than the devil and anything he can hurl our way. He will preserve His Church until He comes back in glory when all will know without a doubt who is in authority.

Thirdly, the Comforter, the one promised by Jesus to His disciples after His resurrection while he was yet with them on earth, is the very one we approach to bring us peace. We pray for peace upon earth in our own time, knowing that we will never attain true peace until we come through our final strife into the calm harbor, the haven of heaven, into the glorious light of the holy Trinity.

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Lord, keep us steadfast in Your Word;  
Curb those who by deceit or sword  
Would wrest the kingdom from Your Son  
And bring to naught all He has done.

Lord Jesus Christ, your pow’r make known,  
For You are Lord of lords alone;  
Defend Your holy Church that we  
May sing your praise eternally.

O Comforter of priceless worth,  
Send peace and unity on earth;  
Support us in our final strife  
And lead us out of death to life.

Text: Martin Luther, 1483-1546; tr. Catherine Winkworth, 1827-78, alt.  
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