A number of us have experienced what some would call catastrophes in our personal lives. I remember one woman from a previous congregation I served who told the story of the murder of her daughter, committed by one of the girl’s former boyfriends. The 25 people in the room (self included) did not expect to hear such a story. We were rendered speechless as this woman told about the circumstances, about her daughter who she so desperately loved, and about how her life had changed so suddenly; so dramatically.

The Amtrak train accident was a shared catastrophe. People from all over the world were aboard the train. One passenger said what I think most of us can identify with: *The first bump, you didn’t know what it was, accept that it was something strong. The second, you knew something was wrong. And the third, forget about it, now you’re praying.*¹ One of the people that died was an acquaintance of a Lutheran pastor in Princeton Junction.

The earthquake and aftershocks that hit Nepal two weeks ago have killed over 8,000 people. Like the people aboard the train,

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they were from all over the world. Local residents are among the very poor who live in the shadow of the largest mountains in the world, including Mt. Everest. It is called the hill country of the Himalayan Mountains but as one person observed it is like saying that the sun is a medium sized star. This is high in the mountains making for very difficult search and rescue work and emergency relief is hindered dramatically. A US Marine helicopter crashed last week trying to bring care to the people of Nepal.

All of this is a reminder that we are united in our suffering. Whether it is as crime victims or accidents or natural disasters or personal illnesses, we are reminded that all of us suffer. When our personal catastrophes are shared, as each of these ultimately is, it holds a great weight over us. Life may seem meaningless and we may feel helpless. One of the great theologians of the 20th and 21st centuries, Krister Stendahl, who died in 2008, wrote:

When everything seems meaningless, when the world hungers for justice and peace, when all the solutions we can think of seem to have their undesirable side-effects for people and for nature, when our imagination runs dry, when our will loses it’s energy, then we cry: Come Holy Spirit . . . come and rescue us from the coolness of cynicism and selfishness. For we understand what Jesus meant with his observation that when problems become overwhelming, then most people’s love will grow cold (Mt 24:12), human solidarity will collapse, and people will look after only their own interests. And we cry that the Spirit may deliver us from that desperation that seeks release in fanaticism – not least the religious kind.2

Powerful words! They sound like they were written last week, or at least since 2001. But Stendahl first wrote these words

in 1990, a generation ago. And he quotes Matthew 24 in which Jesus teaches his disciples that many peoples’ love will grow cold in the midst of their suffering. What can we say about this human inclination toward a coolness that leads to a collapse of human solidarity and drives people to look merely to their own needs, hiding behind fanaticisms of one kind or another? We can say this:

In the face of personal or shared catastrophe, remember who you are! You are people with a history. You are people of the present. And, you are people with a future. Couldn’t that be said of all people? Of course it could. So let’s look at what I mean by each of these things.

First, you are people with a history. Some of you have routes in Scandinavia, others from Germany. Some of you are from Brooklyn, others from Jersey City. Still others have histories originating in England, Ireland, and a host of other countries. We have a rich heritage here at Holy Trinity Church. But when I speak of history, I’m not talking about your family heritage. I’m thinking about your spiritual heritage, your baptism and how that washing connected you to the people of ancient Palestine and to the struggles to form a nation. You are people linked to those who wandered in the desert wilderness and hungered for bread. You
are people connected to those who heard the words of the prophet: *The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor...* (Isaiah 61:1-2a). You are the people united with the disciples of Jesus who heard him say: *Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy* (Matthew 5:7) or *Love one another as I have loved you* (John 15:12). We are a people with a biblical past that makes us who we are.

You are also people of the present. Together we recognize that it is not enough to work hard and provide for our families and ourselves. We are called to come together and pray: *Come, Holy Spirit; come and lift us from our brokenness, raise us from serving only ourselves and make us new people, oriented to our neighbor, seeing our enemies through the eyes of God, remembering Paul’s words to the Corinthians, From now on... we regard no one from a human point of view. ... So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything has become new!* (II Cor. 5:16-17) You are a people of the present, praying *Come, Holy Spirit!*
And, you are a people with a future. Baptized into Christ, even in the midst of adversity, even when confronted by a personal or shared catastrophe, our story is not over nor is it limited to our time on this earth. Our time here is important. Our time in this place is a gift of the Spirit. But, we know that Jesus has shown us a future in his kingdom that is not just here, but one that lives forever. Resurrection life happens here whenever the powers of death are overcome by the love of God made known to us in Jesus of Nazareth. But, resurrection life leads us beyond the catastrophe of the grave itself. In Christ, you have a future! Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!

10 years after the murder of her daughter, the woman who shared her story with the church group I mentioned at the beginning of this message began counseling family members of murder victims. She continues to share her experience and hope with others.

Following the train wreck in Philadelphia one woman was quoted as saying: *People were just hugging each other, pure strangers. If you saw someone who just needed human contact, people were being so kind to each other.* People came out of a neighborhood bodega with bottles of water for the survivors.
Others leant people their telephones to call family to tell them what had happened.

As the people of Nepal were digging out the bodies of loved ones in the aftermath of the quake they offered one another support. Before the international relief agencies arrived young people used social media to organize help in the initial days of the disaster, creating avenues for food, water, and housing to get to those who had lost everything. Today Lutheran Disaster Relief is among the many organizations providing emergency aid, so each of you is represented and playing a role through their effort.

Through it all, remember that we are united not only by our suffering, but by the ways God uses each of us to reach out to those in need. We make it by sticking together, by being people of God reaching out to others.

Yes, in the face of catastrophe, remember who you are! You are people with a biblical history. You are people of the present who cry out regularly, *Come, Holy Spirit!* And you are people with a future in Christ Jesus. . . . *Everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!* (II Cor. 5:17). Amen.