

It's good to be with you. Let's begin with prayer.

The Lord be with you.

We give you thanks, O God, for the people gathered here, and for all the members of the ELCA. Even in the midst of challenging times your Holy Spirit continues to equip the Church with a rich variety of gifts. Thank you for the generosity of ELCA members, congregations and synods whose financial support opens the way for us to do your work through our hands. Bless the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America as together we serve you. Give us courage and give us hope. In Jesus' name. Amen.

As I reflect on my travels during 2009, from the Bishops' Academy in the Middle East to meetings with rostered leaders and visits with members in congregations, I am increasingly convinced that this church is called to bear witness to our faith at the intersection of fear and hope. This is where the crucified and risen Christ meets us and calls us to live and serve and proclaim the Gospel.

Here we are. But how shall we together lead at this intersection, where fear and hope compete for control of our lives and this church?

We must be mindful of what our fears can do to us.

Fear can cause us to become preoccupied with our own survival, possessive of what we have, even mean-spirited and distrustful of others -- sometimes finally downright anti-neighborly. Fear can cause us to long nostalgically for the past so that we numb ourselves to the harsh realities of the present. How tempting to let fear freeze us with indecision and despair, not only as individuals, but as congregations, synods and the churchwide organization.

Think of all the people you and I meet every day at this intersection:

- The breadwinner who has been out of work for nine months
- The person who is months behind in their mortgage and about to lose their home
- The one whose health insurance has run out, but whose disease is only beginning
- The members of a congregation struggling to pay staff, utilities and mortgage, but not at the expense of continuing support for mission beyond their setting

At the intersection of fear and hope we are a Book of Faith church and Scripture speaks to us of God's promises and God's commands.

What Scripture passages come to mind for you, living as we all do at this intersection? When I become discouraged or overwhelmed by difficult decisions, or even anxious

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about an uncertain future, I am drawn to the Easter texts. They acknowledge the reality of fear, and yet they also speak clear words of promise and command.

In Matthew 28 it's early morning and Mary Magdalene and the other Mary have gone to visit the tomb of Jesus. We can only imagine the depth of their pain and despair after the horrifying events of the previous days.

Then an amazing thing happens. An angel of the Lord appears -- one of those messengers God so often sends before God is about to do something profound and unexpected.

The angel speaks clear words of promise: "Do not be afraid ...". But not only words of promise, for the angel also gives a clear command: "Go quickly and tell his disciples he has been raised from the dead."

Fellow believers in the risen Christ and leaders in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America: We stand at the intersection of fear and hope as heirs of that promise. And that Gospel command is also given to us: "Go and tell -- Christ is risen."

The ELCA is richly blessed for this calling. We have so much upon which we can draw:

- The witness, wisdom and generosity of our members, many of whom have lived at this intersection before
- The passion of young adults challenging us to care for God's creation and end hunger and poverty
- The rich, diverse voices from racial and ethnic communities, calling us to be a Pentecost people
- The new possibilities for ministry that arise from our ecumenical and global partners and the rich resources of ELCA institutions and agencies

Every morning when I arise, I am reminded that in Baptism I have been marked with the cross of Christ forever -- a child of God living by faith.

At the intersection of fear and hope let us live as messengers of God, trusting in the covenant God made with us in Holy Baptism. That means for us as the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America we will live:

- Not in isolation, but among God's faithful people
- Not famished, but nourished through the means of grace
- Not turned inward, but serving all people by following the example of Jesus
- Not stationary, but striving for justice and peace in all the earth

Yes, here we are, freed in Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit to be an evangelizing people. Here we are at the intersection of fear and hope, bearing witness, embodying

Christ's presence, living and serving compassionately, confidently and courageously.

Such confidence and compassion and courage only come to us through the power of the Holy Spirit, for which I would like to now pray. So I invite you to place your hands on the head of a person sitting near you so that I might pray for the anointing of the Spirit's power upon you and upon this church, that we might bear witness to Christ at the intersection of fear and hope.

Please, will you do that now? Reach out and place your hand on another's head so that we might pray.

The Lord be with you.

Father in heaven, for Jesus' sake, stir up in these women and men the gift of your Holy Spirit; confirm their faith, guide their lives, empower them in their serving, give them patience in suffering and bring them to everlasting life. Amen