



I've gotten Sarah into this routine of us watching House Hunters International together on HGTV. The idea behind the show is following along this random couple or family who has decided to move to a different place around the world, whether it be because of a job or moving closer to other relatives or for a new cultural experience. The half-hour production usually starts with a brief background not just on the people who need to find a new place to live (hence the "house hunters" title), but also a short snippet about the new country they will call home. It has served as Sarah and my pandemic travel excursion, of sorts, even if through a television

screen. So, in that case, recently we have visited Valencia, Spain; Christchurch, New Zealand; Budapest, Hungary; just to name a few.

However, every once in a while it's rather odd to remember that all these houses and apartments that get displayed on tv were actually someone's homes filled with life-shaping memories: Christmas mornings in that warm cozy living room, future-planning conversations around that old rustic dinner table, parents' comforting words to their children in those sturdy bunk beds. Then, all of a sudden, those near-sacred places of immense meaning are reduced to sheer statistics of how many bedrooms and bathrooms, miles to city centers, mortgage payment calculations. All important to be sure, but it doesn't nearly get to the heart of what made that home truly special: if only the walls could talk.

I cannot help but think of those realities for plenty of houses hundreds of miles to the south of us, as hurricanes decimated entire towns in recent months, including in Lake Charles, Louisiana, where 150mph winds from Hurricane Laura alone threw trees around as if they were toothpicks and downed power lines filled the city streets, not to mention thousands of people displaced and dozens dead. In such moments of fear and anguish not just with the immediate aftermath, but the long-term worries for those families, it would have been fitting to congregate at one of the local church buildings like St. Paul Lutheran Church. Unfortunately, its roof over the sanctuary was torn to shreds and nearly all the pews ripped apart. A different kind of house, a home, in fact, for many of Lake Charles: for that warm cozy feeling with their sisters and brothers in Christ, future-planning conversations not just for the congregation, but the entire community, comforting words heard not just from the pulpit, but from the font and the altar, even from the other end of their cherished pew from a trusted sibling in Christ.

Nevertheless, come that late August day, the people of Lake Charles were forced to experience the words of Psalm 46 in a way they never hoped for: "though the earth be moved, and though the mountains shake in the depths of the sea; though its waters rage and foam." And it all happened not on a television screen, not in a newspaper report, but in their beloved city, in their very meaning-filled homes, in their adored church. It's helpful to remember on this Reformation Sunday, that far too many of our sisters and brothers in Christ throughout the world are forced to re-form their lives in a variety of ways without having any say in the matter at all. And they are more than entitled to be scared, to be as enraged as the imagery of the waters in the Psalm. And no matter the more-than-understandable reaction, God will still respond with same lovingkindness to their broken part of the world as God did for the whole world in Jesus Christ along the waters of Galilee.

One of the images of that brokenness is on the front cover of the bulletin this morning, as you see one of the surviving stained-glass windows from St. Paul's. You will notice many of the pieces are shattered, but the surrounding border remains intact, rather symbolic of God's persistent loving arms surrounding them, not to mention the main image of the angel. Who knows how many stories could be told from the St. Paul's family who found comfort looking at that very window, how it gave them hope for the week ahead after they walked away on a Sunday morning?

It so happens that even amidst that horrifying re-forming of their lives, angels insisted on showing up. Lutheran Disaster Response with local aid organizations immediately went to work chain-sawing trees, removing debris and putting tarps over damaged roofs. Their main headquarters for coordinating their collective response efforts happened in none other than the fellowship hall in the basement of St. Paul's: a reminder that even in the broken places of this world, hope has a way of emerging just as strong there as anywhere else.

The people of Lake Charles, Louisiana, may never hear Psalm 46 quite the same ever again, as they remember the days when they were forced to re-form their lives forever. And yet, the earth can move, the mountains can shake, the waters can thoroughly rage and foam; and still "God [insists on being their] refuge and strength" to sustain them through it all. Yes, there are plenty of ways we, ourselves, can reform our lives to make sure we best care for our families, neighbors and entire communities, including when absolute tragedy strikes; but the ultimate reformation of the world has already happened when God fulfilled the words of Psalm 46 to a completely hope-filled level without our permission: when God gave the whole world the ultimate refuge and strength from the cross and out of a tomb in Jesus Christ, our still-Risen Savior and Lord no matter what this earth will ever unleash upon us. And for that Greatest News of all, we most certainly give thanks to God, indeed! Amen.