

The Triumphant – Ashamed Conception. (Acts 2:36-47).

* It is still fresh in our memory a series of bird and fish deaths that began late last year all around the world. But today we've heard and even experienced more stressful incidents, they surprise us by their intensity and variety. Here wish to mention the earthquakes and tsunami in Japan, tornados, wildfires, and floods in our country. Amazingly, these so-called natural phenomena happened during the Lent Season and right after Easter. If we approach the recent calamities as the sign of the last days, we may critically look at ourselves, and it is by no means beneficial. Another reasonable approach of events is offered by scientists; they regard the recent disasters to be caused by global warming and self-generated processes. Therefore, we have the two viewpoints for discussion. No doubt, because we are God's people, we decide to center on the teaching of the Word.

* We open our discussion with the article by S. Schafer posted on April 13 in the *Reporter* (LCMS' newspaper). It reflects on the recent weather disturbances. In the beginning, the author makes the impressive remark, *LCMS churches and congregation members saw damages as a string of severe spring storms wreaked havoc across the United States: a tornado in Iowa, another tornado in Wisconsin, flooding in North Dakota and wildfires in Texas.* Then, the writer reports that a tornado in Iowa destroyed 100 homes and damaged St. Matthew's Lutheran Church in Mapleton. The outcome of the disaster was pieces of brick blown off the building, damaged roof and a tree fallen on the education area. *Despite this, "St. Matthew's Lutheran Church is a beacon of hope, standing firm in the area of town that was hit the hardest,"* said Ellie Menz, an official. Menz's standpoint was proven with a photo included in the article. In the background we see the imposing building of St. Matthew's. Taken from a distance, it is hard to notice the casualties of the building; at the same time, there are many evidences of the devastating blow in the foreground. By way of contrast, an editor reaches the goal. Now it seems as though the hand of God is not against that church but stands for it. As you can see, by the technique of contrasting, the people of arts achieve their ideas and prove points. That is what we like to do as well.

* When S. Schafer was composing her article, she didn't know that in a couple of weeks or so people would suffer even much greater devastation. *"An awful, terrible, disturbing and deadly day of tornadoes unfolded on Wednesday, April 27, 2011, with more than 100 reported tornadoes striking several states in the South and even a few areas in the Mid-Atlantic,"* said the Weather Channel. Next to this, we read the detailed report of the deadliest tornado from Cordova, Alabama. Two eyewitnesses, G. Bluestein and M. Kunzelman, wrote the article *Mourning for tornado victims in the South.* They reported that at least 250 people died and thousands were injured across Alabama. The article provides a picture of the church, but in this instance, it is the Baptist

Church in Tuscaloosa. It shows the demolished sanctuary from the backside and in the front scene there is a figure of a man praying in a humble manner. As we've seen what happened there, our hearts are filled with sorrow. Here we express our deep regret to all who had lost their relatives, friends, homes, and churches.

* As we contrast the pictures of the two churches, the Lutheran and Baptist, we actually contrast not buildings or Christian denominations but the two substantial ideas. The first one reflects on the Church in glory that manifests its mighty efficacy over the demonic powers. Another idea advocates for the wounded Church, afflicted by schisms, distressed with heresies, yet having hope that the night of weeping will be finished with a joyful morning. Now, viewing the two pictures as one, we receive a bipolar model, let it be called a *triumphant – ashamed model*. It is exactly what we've seen and what we've experienced today. Be sure, Jesus promised his Church victories not defeats as He said, Peter, *the gates of Hades shall never prevail against my Church*, (Mat 16:18). On the other hand, God constantly disciplines the body of his church for her benefit (Heb 12:6-8), even though it is shameful. Please notice, our model doesn't include those who may call themselves church but they are not, (Luk 13:25,26). Therefore, it is for the best of all God's people to be disciplined when it is necessary so that they have ceased from sin, (1Pe 4:1).

* Friends, by means of contrasting, you can also set forth an idea and prove a point. Why not put together certain pictures similar to what we did before? You are free to decide which one to locate in the background and which one in the proscenium. *And what will we contrast?* Well, I think the best with the rest.

Great, let's do it! was an answer.

* A prototype of the church we are called to emulate is displayed in our Sunday reading, (Act 2:36-47). Luke says, on the day of Pentecost the gift of eternal life was bestowed on certain people. But before Peter's listeners realized their guilt, and when their hearts were filled with the most fearful anticipation of punishment, they cried out, *"Brothers, what shall we do?"*(Act 2:37). The duty of a sinner is to repent and be baptized, therefore, those who embraced Peter's message heartily were baptized, and *there were added that day about three thousand souls*, (v.41).

* The next verse contains the marks of the apostolic church. It says, *"And they (parishioners) continued steadfastly in the apostles' teaching, and in fellowship, and in breaking the loaf, and in prayers,"* (v.42). At this moment, we begin to combine the two pictures according to the rule of contrasting. "The best" one portraits the Christians from the Church in Jerusalem, and "the rest" one depicts you and the Christians of your local church. As we can see, the first Christians kept firmly to their duty; they were taught by the apostles on a regular basis, and they put their teaching in practice, (Act 4:32-35) Friends, now recall your time during the Lent relative to your duty as the disciple of Jesus Christ and ask yourselves,

Have you persisted in teaching of the apostles and practicing what you were taught? When you answer this question, collate your faithfulness to the duty of the discipleship with those who from Jerusalem.

* Next in row is the Fellowship – in Greek *koinonia*. It corresponds to the gathering of Jesus' disciples. On the basis of their mutual sympathies, the disciples ate meals together, they helped each other, and they were helped as well. All disciples were happy, (v.46). Those people really participated in the needs of their brothers and sisters in Christ; they even sold their possessions with that purpose! Can you believe this? We think this picture is good enough to be taken in the foreground as you combine it with your own. After that, you may see your own contribution in a humble manner.

* After the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, there was mentioned *breaking the loaf and prayers*. A practice of these things refer to the royal worship celebrated each Sunday by the first community along with prayers. In their gathering, the disciples had fellowship with Jesus Christ and with whole Church on earth and in heaven. Friends, take a minute and think of your priorities on Sundays. That will help determine what and where you real treasure is, (Mat 6:21). Finally, as the last contrasting was made, we've received the *triumphant – ashamed* picture for a public demonstration.

* Dear Friends, in this instance, don't you think that the Heavenly Father may have a reason to discipline us? And it is shameful. However, the given postscript shouldn't discourage us totally. Do you remember what Jesus says about his Church? He says, *the gates of Hades shall never prevail against my Church*, (Mat 16:18). We belong to this triumphant Church, none of us is perfect, but we are saved exclusively by virtue of Jesus' merits who loves his Church to the end, (Joh 13:1). By his death on the cross and resurrection from the dead, Christ demonstrates his supreme authority over all powers on earth and in heaven. It cheers us doubly as we've received a confirmation through the work of the Holy Spirit in and through us, (Col 1:29).

* It seems that we are at the end of the discussion. However, we still have something important to say. Listen, the concept of the demolished church can symbolize anything, except one – God's unfaithfulness toward his bride; otherwise, it would be against God's nature, (1Jn 1:9). The Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is permanently faithful and his love endures forever, (1Ch 16:34). By this word of truth, our hope is kept alive; even if tomorrow all the world would be turn upside down.

Oh, Israel! Give thanks to the LORD, for his steadfast love endures forever.

Amen.