

Christian Message Proposals for VTU the Day after the Massacre

Colleagues,

I didn't get offerings from all 600 of you with my overture last week for "revisions or alternatives" (as one of you asked for) vis-a-vis Pastor Bill King's Christian message at the VTU convocation the day after the massacre. I diidn't even get 6! Only 5. I wonder why so few. So there's no need to turn the submissions over to the local committee for them to choose which ones to pass on to you. You get them all. Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

First off, the original from PastorWilliam H. King, Lutheran Campus Pastor at Virginia Tech:

We gather this afternoon for many purposes: to weep for lost friends and family, to mourn our lost innocence, to walk forward in the wake of unspeakable tragedy, to seek hope in the shadow of despair, to join our voices in a longing for peace, healing, and understanding greater than any single community of faith, to embrace that which unifies, and to reject the seductive temptation of hatred. We gather to share our hurts and our hopes, our petitions and our prayers. We gather also to drink deeply of religious streams which have refreshed parched peoples for generations. We gather

together...Weeping, oh yes, we weep with sighs too deep for words, out of inexpressible pain-but also affirming the sovereignty of life over death. At a time such as this the darkness of evil seems powerful indeed. It casts a pall over our joys, joys as simple as a glorious spring day on the drill field. We struggle to imagine a future beyond this agony. If we ever harbored illusions that our campus is an idyllic refuge from the violence of the world, they are gone forever. Yet we come to this place to testify that the light of love can not finally be defeated. Amid all our pain, the light shines in the darkness and darkness has not overcome it. We can not do everything, but we can do something. We can not banish all darkness but we can, by joining together, push it back. We can not undo yesterday's tragic events, but we can sit in patient silence with those who mourn. As we share light, one with another, we reclaim our campus. Let us deny death's power to rob us of all that we have loved about Virginia Tech. Let us cast our lot with hope in defiance of despair.

This one from Michigan

As we gather here today many of us are mad at God for allowing this to happen. All the good things we religious people talk about seem mighty far away. God seems distant, impotent, and useless. I would be lying if I were to tell you that this doesn't disturb me. But as difficult as it seems to believe in a Good God today, it seems even more difficult to deny what we just celebrated at Easter. God knows we are angry. But God doesn't run away from our anger. God has come to us in Jesus Christ, and he was despised and rejected. You see, Jesus upsets our apple carts when we think we are doing OK. Because of this, he had to be removed, and we killed him.

You would think that we would be in even more trouble with God after this, but amazingly enough that is not what the stories say. Jesus is alive! And what Jesus is saying is that he and his Father still want to be reconciled with us. In Jesus God enters the Godless places of the world so nothing, even our lives can be beyond God.

We are given by God's Holy Spirit very concrete gifts. In Baptism we dare to declare people "Not Guilty". In Communion we celebrate where the world is headed – the great banquet where God gives us all bread to eat and even "the wolf shall live with the Lamb". And we are given possibly the greatest gift of all – the ability to tell one another that this tragedy we see today is not the end. Instead God is somehow shaping us and this world into the way things ought to be.

We can trust Jesus because he's been there. Better yet, Jesus IS here. He doesn't give us up.

One from the West Coast

We are here today because of an overwhelming tragedy experienced by our university community. Some may be impressed primarily by the number of those who died; others because the large number of deaths only deepens an individual experience of tragedy and evil. Thirty-three died together – but each died alone. The loneliness of death is only emphasized by our effort to live as a learning community. The more we speak of trusting god the more we are challenged to explain how we can continue to trust in spite of the reality of evil and death. The university community works together to explore all of life and our world through experiment, intuition, and reason. Today we individually and collectively

remember the limits both to our understanding and our ability to master and control what happens. We are today painfully aware of the limits of our ability to understand and control even the life of an academic community. We know that these things should not have happened but do not know what we might have done to prevent them. The more serious and successful our search for truth in thinking and goodness in living, the more aware we are of our remaining ignorance of truth and our vulnerability to evil.

This ambiguity tempts us to abandon the search for truth and goodness or, even worse, to use it cynically in the service of evil and our own selfish purposes. In the face of that temptation, we need to encourage one another in the search for truth, in the affirmation of the value of life, and in our commitment to use the talents and opportunities given to us in loving the people close to us and serving the communities that make life together possible. We can help each other to continue in that struggle.

One from the Middle West

A word from the Prophet Isaiah, shared by Jews and Christians: "Surely thou art a God who hidest thyself, O God of Israel, the Savior." "Where were YOU, God?" people ask. People of faith—and of un-faith. Isaiah can help us all.

God "hidden" and still "savior?" Both true? Don't REAL saviors have to be visible, not hidden? So which one is it – hidden-God or Savior-God?

In Jesus, Christians claim, Isaiah's opposites converge: God "hidden" where we least expect God to be – on earth, humanized, even on a bloody cross reminiscent of yesterday at

VTU.

AND God as Savior – also on earth, humanized, also on that cross where death takes its toll. But in his death, so the Christian message, death itself meets its master, gets undone.

In yesterday's massacre God-hidden was right in our face, no God-savior there at all. In Jesus' day bloody massacres happened too. When once asked to "explain why," he refused. Instead, he addressed the survivors, "Did you hear God's voice in the destruction, calling you to a major turn-around? If not, expect more bad news."

Though hidden in catastrophes, God is not absent. God-hidden has a voice. Some hear it; some don't.

For folks – also us here today – who do hear, who make that U-turn, God comes out of hiding. Comes on as Savior. In the Jesus story. With a freebee offer for survival. Survival big-time. Even in the face of yesterday's horrors.

Adding Jesus to the equation changes things. The horror story doesn't disappear, but Jesus-added puts a different conclusion at the end of the equation—words of hope, words of courage, for us in our agony. Yesterday was a visit from God-hidden. The Christian message for us survivors is God-Savior. Receive it. Believe it.

One from the East Coast

Nothing, absolutely nothing, can come from my own language system, or any language system, which can adequately meet the desperate death and dying of these days. As a minister of

Jesus Christ, and like you, I am numbed and dumbed down by these days of death. We cry out, we crawl, we stagger woundedly towards a weeping Christ, begging for some kind, of consolation in the mystery of death's dagger which struck like a thief in the middle of our campus home. Our lives are changed forever, but we have an eternal promise in Jesus Christ. Believe it. In this everlasting moment of profound tragedy, we still hang on to life in a fleeting, fearful, forgetful, and frenzied age. We know that there are the woundings of death and dying in the lives of each of us, and in the constant war news of the daily press, but we are struck dumbfounded that here at Virginia Tech, surrounded by the beautiful mountains, that the darkness of death can slip in so unexpectedly. The world has changed for each and all of us. We lament, we cry out, to a God who seems to be absent, and our tears search for some kind of answer to an unfathomable tragedy. Words dry up...all the knowledge on our campus disintegrates in the face of these days of death.

Repeat it to yourself throughout the day: "Nothing...shall separate you and me, from the love that we have in Jesus Christ our Lord." Our Lord comes to us in those Words. This is the only and the final answer to what has happened. Take it with you.

We have seen death; now you have experienced the loneliness of death's dark passage. But...we have also experienced healing in Jesus Christ...go, each of you, in that healing hope. Amen.

Another one from the Middle West ["sticking with the light/darkness imagery of Pastor King's original"]

For ages Christians have prayed this prayer when darkness

prevails: "Enlighten our Darkness, O Lord our God, by the light of your Christ. May his Word be a lamp to our feet and a light to our path." We Hokies have met darkness as never before. "Yes, God, Enlighten our darkness."

The light/darkness language in Christian tradition starts out tough, telling us that we are not only victims of darkness in times like this, but also agents of darkness at other times. Yesterday's mad murderer (as we will learn tomorrow) screamed about the darkness—lovelessness, he said—that encompassed him at VTU. Clinically sick though he was, did he speak truth? Is that darkness not just his deep darkness, but ours as well?

"Enlighten our darkness, O Lord our God," both the darkness inflicted upon us and the darkness we inflict on others.

This Christ-light "shines into the darkness," we Christians say. Initially to expose all agents of darkness. And then, much to their surprise, our surprise too, it turns its beam on the light-bearer himself. His face is smiling, not grimacing, his hands open, not clenched. Look closely, and you see scars in those hands, signs of his own wrestling with Deep Darkness long ago. "Come, follow me," he says. "Stay in my circle of light. Yes, you will encounter darkness again, but the darkness did not overcome me, and it will not overcome you."

In our agony, Christ's light shines into our darkness too—yes, shines over to us. We cannot banish all darkness, but we can step into the Christ-light, walk in that light, and reflect its glow as we strive to reclaim our campus. The "light of God's Christ" resources us to deny death's power, to cast our lot with hope in defiance of despair.