

Times of trial: We must suffer to understand hope

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [November 14, 2001](#) issue

Viking Penguin Lives, a series of biographies, lists *Martin Marty on Martin Luther* among its forthcoming titles (2003). Writing this book will keep me busy during 2002; doing the reading for it has delighted me through much of 2001. Reading Luther while writing and speaking about the devastations to buildings, bodies, souls and spirits that have overtaken us this autumn has been one way of getting “back to basics” for me.

Most treatments of Luther during the past century, if they resisted the temptation of making a modern out of him, dealt with this question: How can we get “inside” someone who lived with the insecurities of the late-medieval environment? Johan Huizinga wrote about “the violent tenor of life” in those times.

Now all of a sudden we, too, find ourselves living in a world of violence, terror and insecurity, a world that brings us closer to “Luther’s problem” (How can I find a gracious God?) even if we don’t all accept his solution.

H. G. Haile’s *Luther: An Experiment in Biography* (Princeton University Press, 1980) focuses on some passages from Luther’s writings that speak to many of us. “I did not come to my theology of a sudden, but had to brood ever more deeply. My trials brought me to it, for we do not learn anything except by experience,” Luther writes. Two days with New York area Lutheran clergy and time with Christians of all stripes elsewhere convinces me that they, too, are undergoing such trials and learning from them.

“When his old friend Justus Jonas held Paul up as a paragon of faith . . . , Luther interrupted him,” Haile writes. “‘I don’t think he believed as firmly as he talks. I cannot believe as firmly either, as I can talk and write about it.’” Does that mean that Christian witness is self-delusion? I think not.

The preachers, counselors and good neighbors who “talk and write” about faith in spite of the traumas of the time will tell you that doing so strengthens their own faith. They understand what Luther wrote about times of trial: “[Without] trials . . . man can neither know scripture and faith, nor can he fear and love God. *If he has never suffered, he cannot understand what hope is.*”

At Plymouth Church in Minneapolis the congregation and I wrestled with a text that challenged us to “understand what hope is”: Isaiah 45:7, which, with Amos 3:6, is the passage I’d most like to delete from scriptures. Here it is in the King James Version: “I make peace, and create evil: I the Lord do all these things.” And the passage from Amos asks, “Shall there be evil in a city, and the Lord hath not done it?” Not for a minute do I believe that God-through-terrorists “created the evil” in the city. But I do believe that all Christians have to wrestle with the issue of God in all.

When I preached at Immanuel Lutheran Church in New York City, the lectionary led me to Psalm 121: “The Lord shall preserve thy going out and thy coming in from this time forth, and even for evermore.” The New Yorkers whose dear ones went out to the World Trade Center one morning and did not come back might well ask whether that passage is true.

Yet, astonishingly, I have found that it is the agonized people nearest Ground Zero—the pastors, chaplains, lay counselors, mourners and good Christian neighbors who were closest to suffering—who are the most ready to be stripped of illusions, easy answers and self-help positive thinking. They are the ones most ready to “talk and write” and embody what all of us are learning these days: *“If one has never suffered, he cannot understand what hope is.”* And to experience the God who, as Isaiah records, creates light and peace—the gracious God whom Luther sought and found.