About 10 years ago, I had an opportunity to visit the *First Thai/Laos Presbyterian Fellowship* as part of the biannual gathering of the *National Asian Presbyterian Council* out in Las Vegas, Nevada. This fellowship began with a vision among a few lay leaders who were immigrants from Thailand and Laos. They developed this partnership with a Thai Presbyterian church in the Los Angeles area. On certain weekends, the Rev. Dr. Prachuab Dechawan would drive 5 hours each way to spend time with this new Christian fellowship and then drive back. With the support and endorsement of their local Presbytery, they became a new church development primarily focusing on reaching out to the immigrants from SE Asia. Over the years, it has had its ups and downs with many challenges, as well as blessings. However, their faith would not be faltered or discouraged. These lay leaders continued to press forward while fixing their eyes on the “prize of the heavenly calling”.

About 5 years ago, this dream finally became a reality as the fellowship officially became a chartered congregation in the PC(USA). Through its many trials and challenges, the people have kept their vision while continuing to share the messages of hope to those who needed to hear the most. That congregation has become one of the most vibrant and fastest growing multi-cultural worshipping communities in the PC(USA) today.

During my visit, many of its leaders shared their ministry joys and challenges especially in the area of evangelism and outreach among those who live in their community. Many were among the poorest of the poor and some may have issues with their immigrations status. Nevertheless they continued to be amazed by how God has called them to take on this ambitious and daunting task of leading a gospel ministry in a city also famously known as the “Sin City”.

Chances are, most people would NOT have thought of Las Vegas as the fertile ground for any form of sustainable vibrant ministry but surprisingly it is. God sure has a funny sense of humor! That’s kind of like when God sent Jonah to preach the Good News to the city of Nineveh because Jonah believed that those people there did not deserve to hear the message of hope and salvation due to their sins and disobedience…but who are we to be the judge?

The spiritual needs are great for the people of Las Vegas, especially among those who are lost, abandoned, and neglected by our society. Some might have “lost” everything literally because of their gambling addiction, drug and alcohol abuses, domestic violence, or simply falling out of grace and through the cracks in our society. They need to hear the message of the gospel, as much as we do.

As part of our visit, Pastor Prachuab challenged us to go on a little local site visit…not just around the church building but out onto the street…onto the Strip of Las Vegas and do some people watching. That’s right! Chances are when we think of the Strip, we think of the casinos, the hotels, the dazzling lights and sounds, various forms of entertainments for adults and also for children, but on this day we were challenged to do a spiritual prayer walk, to dig a little deeper by looking beneath the faces of people. Try to see what was really going on through the people’s lives. What was on their mind at that given moment?

Some of them may be stressed by their family’s needs, dealing with personal, health, emotional, or financial issues. Some may be coming off her 2nd job and on her way to her 3rd in order to make ends meet. Some may be wrestling with domestic violence and contemplating suicidal thoughts. There’s a lot going on that we do not really know or see…but how many of us really care to pay attention to these people, instead of passing them by on the corner, while ignoring most of them.

The Pastor offered a few suggested places to visit during this people-watching social experiment and I chose to go to the downtown bus depot where many people simply hang out…especially when it’s 108° outside. It had air-conditioning, bathrooms and water facilities. My goal was simply to make observation but without actually taking notes and letting them know why I was there. To make the long story short, I did spend about 2 hours there at the downtown bus depot and was able to connect with a few folks and engage them in conversations.

I came upon a woman who was physically abused by her boyfriend and is now homeless with her 5 year old child, living on government assistance. I met a man who was on the road to recovery from drug and alcohol addiction while seeking help in the half-way house.

These were not criminals or dangerous people but they were simply everyday folks who bore much emotional pains and distresses in their lives. Not only did these folks need help physically, but they need help emotionally and spiritually as well. More importantly they need to hear the message of salvation and hope, as much as we do. But as Jesus said to his parable in a parable that *the harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few*.[[1]](#footnote-1)  How many are willing to answer the call, to go and take a step beyond our personal comfort zone?

This past week, as many of us have experienced and shared the pain and trauma of what happened along the Strip of Las Vegas, we try to shed some light and common sense of what happened and what kind of world we are living in these days. Why did the gun-man do what he did? What was his motivation and purpose? Who was to blame? The individual madman or society as a whole? What can we do to prevent this from happening ever again…or do we just wait until the next tragic event with more innocent lives being taken? When is enough enough? This is not a Las Vegas issue or a US issue, but a human issue. There are many questions, but very few answers.

But one thing we do know is that there are many hurting and dying victims out there, not only physically, but emotionally and spiritually as well. **People are in dire need of some good news and hope that they can anchor their faith on, especially in times like these, when everything became chaotic and irrelevant. Everything can simply vanish or be taken away in a flash before our eyes.**

**In these darkest nights, in these remotest corners of our lives, and in the middle of the desert, the people need to hear the good news and consolation.** The people need the LORD! **No wealth, no fancy cars, no luxury and fantasy livings with all the glitz and glamour of this earth can earn anyone the hope and salvation that only our Lord Jesus Christ can provide.** **The people are in need of a Savior whom they can anchor their hopes and their faith in…nothing else.**

In the Old Testament passage that we read earlier, the prophet Isaiah was prophesying to a desperate community that was also out in the desolate desert, that in spite of all of their challenges, they shall bear fruits, not just any fruits, but good fruits. **God has not given up on his people, despite their sinful natures and rebellions, there’s no reason then they should give up on themselves?** Even if the fertile soil has not been fruitful for years, the people must not lose hope or lose sight of God’s plan in their lives. God will trim the hedges in the vineyard and plant new seeds. God will remove any stones that may hinder the growth and enable good fruits to spring forth. As the prophet Isaiah proclaimed, **out of bloodshed, there shall be justice; and out of distress and outcry, there shall be righteousness**[[2]](#footnote-2). This was exactly the message of hope that the people have been crying out for, coming out of the wilderness desert and in the field of bloodshed and despair.

Similarly in our New Testament reading, the Apostle Paul affirmed such hope of renewal of what is to come, by claiming that **whatever earthly gains we possess shall ALL be considered as losses,** if not for the saving grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. **We may have all the money, fame, prestige, and power in this world but still be living in a superficial, meaningless and empty life.** None of these earthly gains matters. None of these would get us closer to where God has prepared us to be, through God’s redemption and grace. We must ***forget what lies behind and strain forward to what lies ahead. We must press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly calling rested in Jesus Christ.[[3]](#footnote-3)***

We do not need to look far in order to identify the drastic dichotomy among the people across the economic spectrum, among those who have and have not, those who lavishly exploit the limited resources and those who are being marginalized by the various injustices of our society and by our own selfish actions. There are people who sleep in the penthouses in luxury high rises while down the same block there are people who sleep in cardboard boxes. There are people who sumptuously consume and squandering food and water, while others are living in starvation and malnourishment, not knowing where their next meal may come. This is not just a Las Vegas or a New York problem, but a human problem. It is OUR problem!

But turning our eyes the other way and ignoring such contrast of reality will NOT solve the problem, it will simply make it worse. This is where the gospel comes in, as it brings the universal hope of salvation to ALL people. As Jesus said, *“those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners."[[4]](#footnote-4)* No one shall be left out of the table and everyone shall be invited to feast at the Lord’s buffet.

In times like these when evil and atrocity have consumed and tainted our lives, we wake up to this new harsh reality that **evil does exist but it does not have the final word…only God does!**

Christ has triumphed over evil and conquered over our human sins through his death and resurrection. In life or in death, we belong to God and to God alone. **Out of bloodshed, we shall see justice. Out of the people’s outcry and distress, righteousness and hope shall prevail.**

In closing, I would invite you all to meditate upon the words of ***Psalm 140***, which can be found as part of the insert. Psalm 140 is a prayer for deliverance, as the psalmist sought and petitioned for God’s help in the midst of despairs and hopelessness. **In times like these, in the midst of natural and human-cause disasters and evil tragedies, we need to examine and rediscover the root of our faith, our priority of living, as well as our relationship with God. What grounds us in the midst of challenges and storms of our lives? What gives us hope of our future, in the midst of our fears and evils in our lives?**

As the Apostle Paul said, whatever earthly losses we experience, even our lives, is considered gains in Christ.[[5]](#footnote-5) We shall press on forward towards the goal of the heavenly calling through Jesus Christ our Lord.

From Psalm 140….let us pray!

***Deliver me, O LORD, from evildoers; protect me from those who are violent, who plan evil things in their minds and stir up wars continually. They make their tongue sharp as a snake's, and under their lips is the venom of vipers.***

***Guard me, O LORD, from the hands of the wicked; protect me from the violent who have planned my downfall. The arrogant have hidden a trap for me, and with cords they have spread a net, along the road they have set snares for me.***

***I say to the LORD, "You are my God; give ear, O LORD, to the voice of my supplications." O LORD, my Lord, my strong deliverer, you have covered my head in the day of battle. Do not grant, O LORD, the desires of the wicked; do not further their evil plot.***

***Those who surround me lift up their heads; let the mischief of their lips overwhelm them! Let burning coals fall on them! Let them be flung into pits, no more to rise! Do not let the slanderer be established in the land; let evil speedily hunt down the violent!***

***I know that the LORD maintains the cause of the needy, and executes justice for the poor. Surely the righteous shall give thanks to your name; the upright shall live in your presence.***

1. *Matthew 9:37* [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Isaiah 5:7* [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Philippians 3:13-14* [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Mark 2:17* [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Philippians 3:8* [↑](#footnote-ref-5)