



*You must understand this, that in the last days distressing times will come. For people will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, inhuman, implacable, slanderers, profligates, brutes, haters of good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, holding to the outward form of godliness but denying its power. (2 Timothy 3: 1-5 NRSV)*

When World War II broke out in Europe, all of the major powers had to move quickly to muster their armed forces, and all available weapon systems had to be utilized. In the case of the British Army, this meant re-activating equipment that had not been used since the Boer War in South Africa a half-century earlier. One piece of light artillery in particular had an interesting firing procedure. Per the operating manual, five men were assigned to fire the cannon. But two members of the crew were required to perform an odd ritual. When the piece was loaded and ready to fire, two members of the crew would snap to attention and remain this way until after the cannon launched its round. The artillery officers were baffled by this routine and saw no need for those two men. Finally, a long-retired military officer was called in to watch the firing procedure. After viewing the crew fire the cannon several times, he exclaimed, "I have it. They are holding the horses."

During the Boer War, horses were still the principal means of transporting artillery and moving it into firing position. This particular light-artillery piece would have required two horses, and therefore two soldiers had to hold the reins of the horses during the firing of the weapons to keep the animals from running off. Horses had long since been phased out, but the five-man crew was left intact. This meant that two of the five men functioned merely as placeholders. (From Jonah Goldberg, "Dan, Done," *National Review*, March 28, 2005)

I thank Pastor Scott Schantzenbach for sharing this story with members of our synod's *Mission on the Move* implementation team. This story poses the essential challenge to all our present institutions and how they serve God's mission. I would not limit its application to the church alone. The challenge for us in our day is to recognize through divine wisdom the core elements of living tradition that need to be preserved and nurtured while at the same time pruning those needless parts of the tradition that need to be changed. Where are the placeholders that are simply going through the forms and motions? In what areas of our lives and institutions do we waste time, energy, and resources still "holding the horses?" How do we maximize our impact in the world as followers of Jesus Christ? How can we be both honest and hopeful in our holy conversations regarding God's will and mission for our lives? A little food for Lenten reflection.

*Holy God, fashion us into disciples and not placeholders. Solidify our calling and give us wisdom constantly to evaluate and reform our institutions and patterns to make them more effective and responsive to your saving mission in the world. Amen*