Ulrich Zwingli (1484-1531) was the newly appointed People’s Priest, or Leutpriestertum, at Zurich’s Groosmünster church. While visiting the Swiss town of Bad Pfäfers in September 1519 he learned of a new wave of plague devastating Zurich and immediately returned home. Zwingli ministered to the city’s afflicted and himself fell ill. His brother, Andreas, would perish from the disease, along with an estimated quarter to half of all Zurich’s citizens.

Zwingli’s song shows him falling sick, battling the disease, and convalescing. The words speak to his acceptance of divine providence (“Do what Thou wilt; me nothing lacks. Thy vessel am I; to make or break altogether”) and promise a future of faithful acts (“my lips must thy praise and teaching bespeak more than ever before, however it may go”). As a Reformation leader Zwingli went on to oppose longstanding church practices that contradicted his understanding of the Bible, including the veneration of saints and statues, priestly celibacy, and the sale of indulgences.

Although he didn’t write the Plague Song to be performed during worship services, the text can be found in many sixteenth and seventeenth century Protestant hymnals. Zwingli’s words remind us 500 years later that a commitment to others and even personal tribulation can lead to a renewed state of grace.

General Assembly 224 set aside this year's Reformation Sunday as a day for the “whole church to commit to continuous discernment of how to meet the social justice, economic, and spiritual challenges of the pandemic.” The Presbyterian Historical Society joins this effort by sharing Zwingli’s Plague Song in English on page 2 of this insert or at www.history.pcusa.org/rs
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