

Sermons at Saint Paul's

Creating Peace through Spiritual Nourishment and Service in the World

The Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost/September 10, 2017

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Hurricane Irma has hit Florida directly this morning, after leaving devastation in its wake in the Caribbean. Amy and I have never been in a category 4 hurricane. In September, 1985 Hurricane Gloria started out with the status of category 4 but when it reached us on the coast of Massachusetts it had weakened to an extra-tropical storm. Nevertheless we found ourselves without electricity, and so without hot water, for a week. We were young with 4-month-old and 2-year-old sons. A parishioner brought over a kerosene lamp. Later in the week we took a shower in another parishioner's home. Refrigerated foods spoiled. We must have made preparations because I don't remember us going hungry.

The experience of a hurricane or damaging storm might help us understand the scriptural lessons of today's readings. There are warnings, a sense of urgency, and preparations that are made. Let me explain.

Ezekiel is commissioned to be a sentinel and give warnings. He is the CNN of his day. He is to warn the "wicked." That is a charged word for us. He means those who confide in their own strength (as we prayed in the collect) and do not rely on the mercy of God. The storm is too much for us to handle on our own. Perhaps instead of wicked, the word we might use is self-sufficient, un beholden to anyone else, especially God, self-absorbed, so self-important that they can't see beyond themselves. The warning is captured in the words of the hymn we just sang: "Did we in our own strength confide, our striving would be losing..." Ezekiel says the Lord has no pleasure in our losing, even in our losing life itself, but desires us to turn back, turn back to God whose love holds us eternally.

There is an immediacy to this situation! Everyone can feel the urgency of a coming hurricane. There is a crisis to be faced. There are also life challenges that we know will press upon each of us. We cannot time their coming like the weather but we know they will beset us at some point.

When Paul describes urgency in spiritual terms he says “now is the moment for you to wake from sleep.” The night has ended at the resurrection. Daybreak is upon us. Baptism is when we first believed, and every moment after that is a step in the direction of the ultimate fulfillment of the day. Jesus called it the kingdom of God, when everything is mended and made whole. There is an urgency to live into that love and forgiveness.

The urgency is captured by a blessing often used at funerals. It goes: “Life is short. And we do not have much time to gladden the hearts of those who make this earthly pilgrimage with us. So be swift to love...” Paul says, “Love your neighbor as yourself.... Love is the fulfilling of the law.” So be swift to love. It is a matter of some urgency.

We prepare ourselves for life’s storms, Paul said, by putting on “the armor of light.” I assume that is like boarding up the windows before the hurricane hits, stocking up on supplies, sometimes getting out of the storm’s way. In our spiritual lives Jesus talks about forgiveness. Forgiveness is part of the glue that keeps our roof from blowing off! Jesus knows that this is hard to do, so he gives some hints about how to reconcile. He wants us to have healthy communication. He would have us speak to the person about one’s feelings and concerns directly. Venting to someone else is just avoidance. Jesus recommends listening to and addressing real issues. Rather than hiding secrets or conflict, the individuals and community can bring them into the light for healing.

Taking on life’s challenges is no time to harbor animosities or foster grudges. That takes up so much energy that is needed elsewhere. Additionally, we all matter. We are all and equally part of God’s household. As our theme for the year states, “We all rise together.” Animosity just brings us down.

Preparation is also having a faith story that can make sense of what we are going through. I like to think of the gospel as a lens through which we can

see the challenges in front of us in a way that helps us to be made more whole. The hurricane is striking Florida whether one relies on God or not. So what is your narrative? How do you make sense of what is happening? A redemptive story moves from bad to good. The alternative is a contamination story that goes from good to bad. We can choose our stories. Preparation for challenge is having a redemption story.

Over vacation I was reading the closing chapters of the Acts of the Apostles. Paul was on board a ship that would be pounded by a violent storm. Paul warned the centurion in charge that the voyage would be met with danger and much heavy loss. Nevertheless the pilot and the owner of the ship set sail. Soon a violent wind, called the northeaster rushed down upon them. The situation was urgent. To the 276 persons on the ship, Paul urged them to keep up their courage and have faith in God. It was good preparation. Paul had everyone eat something. Afterwards they lightened the ship by throwing cargo including the wheat overboard. An angel of the Lord assured Paul that all would be well. Eventually they attempted to beach the ship, everyone making it safely to shore, where the inhabitants of the island treated them with unusual kindness.

This is a redemptive narrative that even when we are challenged beyond our capacity there is courage to be found. I have been wondering this week where courage comes from? I think one source is the resurrection that has ended the night. Daybreak is upon us. The future belongs to God. To be honest (at least for me) that trust does not come easily, but it is there. We could choose to tell another story that, in Paul's case, might blame the pilot and owner for setting sail and end with bitterness. That would be a contamination story. To prepare for the great challenges that may lie ahead choose a story that is redemptive, a gospel story. It always ends with new life, and a love that is stronger than loss.

When Amy and I had a young family we lived through an extra-tropical storm that knocked out our electricity for a week. That was a challenge. We have encountered other challenges through the years, one or two, that felt like they hit us with hurricane-force winds. I think that is true for anyone. The warning is not to go it alone. Turn back, turn back to God's household into

which each of us was baptized. It is a matter of some urgency. Life is short as the blessing goes. Be swift to love. As a gathered community we “arise and stand upright” as the psalm says. And one of the most important things we do is to be keepers of the gospel story; and not only that, we teach our children. It prepares them for life. Ours is a redemptive story; it is a hopeful story; it is a story that helps to make us whole.

Amen.