

Sermon Text: Matthew 18:15-20

This is a different sermon for me. It's a sermon as I struggle with all the questions and all the anger and all the doubts and all the unease and sadness and grief about the storm. I began in my thoughts about Israel of old and how they experienced natural disasters as judgment because of sin. Now, we do not, and yet we do experience tragedy as something wrong and alien to what our hearts tell us God had in mind for this creation. At first glance, it seems contradictory that ancient Egypt experienced God as full of awesome power and might, and at the same time, the only source of meaning and peace. Filled with emotion, I remember reading Psalm 29, in the dark, at one of my former churches, right after Hugo, that remained in the dark for 13 days and two Sundays, and I remember reading, “The voice of the Lord is upon the waters; the God of glory thunders, the Lord, upon many waters. The voice of the Lord is powerful. The voice of the Lord is full of majesty. The voice of the Lord breaks the cedars, breaks the cedars of Lebanon. He makes Lebanon to skip like a calf, and Sirion like a young wild ox. The voice of the Lord flashes forth flames of fire. The voice of the Lord shakes the wilderness, shakes the wilderness of Kadesh. The voice of the Lord makes the oaks to whirl, and strips the forest bare, and in his temple, all cry, “Glory.” The Lord sits enthroned over the flood. The Lord sits enthroned as a king forever.” Then, verse 11, this same Lord, “May the Lord give strength to his people. May the Lord bless his people with peace.” It seems, at first, odd that they sought peace from the same God they ascribe such awesome and terrible power. Then we recall Elijah, who tried to hide from danger and hide from God in a cave on Mount Horeth, and in that cave, the word of the Lord came to him and said to him, “What are you doing in here, Elijah?” And he said, “I have been very jealous for the Lord, the God of Hosts, for the people of Israel have forsaken thy covenant and thrown down thy altars and slain thy prophets with a sword, and I, even I, only am left, and they seek my life, to take it away,” and God said, “Go forth, Elijah, go forth, and stand upon the mount before the Lord.” And behold, the Lord passed by, and had a great and strong wind rent the mountains in broken pieces of rock before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind, and after the wind, an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake, and after the earthquake, a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire, and after the fire, after the fire, a still, small voice. Earlier still, God's grace and awesome power is proclaimed in the ancient story of Noah and the flood. Over and over, Israel noted that there is destruction and wind and storm and uncertainty in this world, but God is still God, and God is not in the wind, not in the earthquake, not in the fire or even the flood, but mostly in the hope and the hearts of those who can discern God's persistent, still, small voice in the background beneath and above and beyond the chaos. Jesus says in Matthew about the days of Noah, “As in those days before the flood, they were eating and drinking and marrying and giving in marriage until the day, until the very day, that Noah entered the ark.” You see, there was warning, and so many of us feel warnings are for others, not for us. Those who say the Bible has nothing to speak to modern men and women, they make me weary. It speaks directly then and now to our struggle for meaning in the face of chaos. It speaks to our conflicted hope and trust in God, God within and somehow behind this world of uncertainty and violence, and yes, even death. All through the Old Testament, we hear the people lament the sudden destruction of great cities and the loss of homes and lives. How often did the refugee Israelites complain, “Lord, how can we praise you in a foreign land, and how can we praise you out here, starving and thirsty, in the desert?” How often did their anger rise up to God, such as found in Psalm 44. You know, Psalm 44 is a Psalm that we almost never read. It embarrasses us, but it says to

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God, “Roust thou self! Why sleepest thou, oh Lord, wake up! Do not cast us off forever. Why dost thou hide thy face? Why dost thou forget our affliction and oppression for our soul is bowed down to the dust, and our body cleaves to the ground? Rise up and come to our help. Deliver us for the sake of thy steadfast love, for the sake of thy steadfast love, come and prove you are a loving God. Do something.” Says Psalm 44. You see, old Scripture does speak to you. Our faith in science and systems and plans and people is shaken when a disaster such as Katrina and the aftermath confronts our security and confronts our human smugness. Again, we learn, and again, we will forget, that what we hold to as a firm foundation in a good culture and country can so quickly disintegrate into chaos and panic and divisive, bitter blaming. One good that can come out of this situation is the understanding that we trust too much in our own cleverness and our own predictions and our own technology. There are forces bigger, and as the kids might say, badder, than we can cope with. Some of these forces are external, and some are within us all. We are smaller and less significant than we like to imagine, and we are also closer, much closer, than we allow ourselves to think. I know it makes us feel good to say that only a few people went wild and went violent, running off rescue helicopters, and sending doctors fleeing for their lives, just a few bad eggs, but they are we. They are citizens of this country, this country once prided with a heavy flavoring of at least nominal Christianity and at least the lip service of love of neighbor and community spirit during crisis. I don’t know how we can ever think that way again. We are not what we were, and in fact, if in fact, we ever were truly a nation of nominal Christian culture marked with love of neighbor and community spirit during crisis, today, today it no longer feels that way. The current after the storm blame game seems to me to completely miss the point. It isn’t a racial thing, though some will make it out that way, and it is not a political thing, though some will seek to paint it that way, it seems to me to be a human nature thing. It is whom we are when the thin veneer of civilization falls away.

One small story of grace, you may have missed. I heard this. I tried to find out more about it. I heard this only once. You may have missed this. A small group, a group of very calm and very humble Vietnamese Christians, who were in that dome of terror in New Orleans, chose to wait. They jumped in front of no one to board the busses out, even though busses came and left. They simply waited, and graciously allowed others to board the busses, and said they would be happy to be last of all. They would be happy to give space to the more needy, to the more panicked, to the more anxious, and they would pray, and they would peacefully wait. They showed their love and their trust by enduring and putting others first. They supported each other, and they prayed and they sang songs. We who claim Christ are supposed to be those who know full well the tendencies, the worst of humanity, yet we love each and every flawed human regardless, even that flawed human we see when we look in the mirror every day. God in Christ came to reveal our need for a Savior from above and beyond all human rulers and systems, and God came in Jesus Christ personally because nothing less would do. What did we do in the face, in the crisis of the Holiness in our midst? You know what we did, and you know the cross. God put us first in Jesus Christ. He said, “I will be last.” God forgave us. God loved us, and he sent the promised Holy Spirit to enable us to shake the chaos and to shake the selfishness out of our eyes and to look around this fallen world with new eyes, and see God’s beloved even in the face of the violent, even in the face of the indifferent, even in the face of the racists, even in the face of the timid officials, who waited too long to send in the troops. So many people are tempted to anger in these days and to aim and to blame someone, to pretend the whole mess is the fault of a few. We can’t do that. The

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hurricane happened, with or without our planning or permission, it happened. Those who stayed behind after mandatory evacuation took a risk they had taken before and won. This time they lost. Some, I know, may have had no way out, but many simply chose to stay. Again, we cannot blame. I remember during Hugo, right before Hugo, when they said, “Get out of Myrtle Beach.” My parents, at the time, lived less than a mile from the Atlantic Ocean, and less than 8’ above sea level, and they thought, “It will be fine. We’ll be all right.” We think bad things happen only to other people, but bad things do happen, and they happen to us all. This has happened, and I’m reminded of what a counselor once told me, “We pretend we do not have to fix the problem if we can fix the blame.” Children do that. Children do that. She started it, or it’s his fault, or I didn’t break it. Well, whole lives are broken. Who started it? Who stayed? Whose fault? Who cares! What good could possibly come now that we are in a sad grief of feeling the pain and loss of others, and at the same time, the pain and loss of the dream of what kind of country we live in. We have lost something, and we cannot think of ourselves as always good and always competent and always responsive to everything that befalls us. Sometimes we fall down. Sometimes we, as citizens die, not just by the hundreds, but perhaps by the thousands, and up until now, the best-laid plans did not include the violence in the human heart, even against rescuers. We want to say even now that this is not who we are, but it is who we are now, and Scripture and its profound economy of words has said this before. The days are evil, how then should we live? The old, old Scripture is speaking to us again. The days are evil, and from now on, I am sure, that governors will declare martial law first and National Guard first, and then will come the rescue and the medical teams. Sad, but something has changed, and we are not what we thought we were, but it is not too late to change. It is not too late to change. In Ezekiel, there is the same idea that evil and chaos are all around, how then should we live. Ezekiel records, “As I live, says the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked. No pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked should turn, repent and live, turn back, turn back to God.” There is something very simple in Scripture that we have forgotten. We sometimes out clever ourselves. Scripture is about God wanting a relationship with us and a relationship between us. It is based on mutual love and concern and compassion, and from the very beginning of Genesis, the Bible records that that failed. Then God gave the law, the Ten Commandments. Again, it prescribes love of God and love and compassion and respect of neighbor. It is the law that we are to live within. Then I heard and many of you heard a policeman quoted as saying to a Katrina survivor, a survivor who asked the policeman for help, he said, according to the quote, “There is no law. It’s every man for himself.” It is this horrible crisis, which has brought to light that attitude. That attitude which is pervasive in our culture and this same crisis illustrates where that attitude leads us – into chaos and despair and violence. When we are a people who ignore God and each other, we become dangerous to each other and ourselves. Israel once cried out, Wake up God we are dying down here, but in the early Christian church, there came a similar cry in the letter to the Ephesians, but it was from God to the people, and from God to the people through the Apostle Paul, the word came, “Sleeper, awake. Rise from the dead and Christ will shine on you.” Rise from spiritual death and disconnection, and God will shine on you. Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people, but as wise, making the most of the time because the days are evil.” It continues, “Do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. Do not get drunk with wine, but be filled with the Spirit, and as you sing Psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, make melody to the Lord in your heart.” In other words, think and meditate upon the Lord all day, and it will change the way you respond to others, giving thanks to God the Father at all times, even

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difficult times, for everything in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. Then verse 21, “Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ. Serve one another knowing that God in Christ has served us.” God has always had a will and a boundary of love that is vertical and horizontal. We were meant to live within those boundaries. When that breaks down, for whatever reason, Cain and Abel, murder from brother to brother always plays out. As Christians, we should know, and I believe we do know, that sitting back and feeling good about ourselves from our comfortable lives and fixing blame, and leaning deep into our chair cushion, that is not faith. Owning our part and our common humanity and our common responsibility to one another, that’s the boundary we are to live within, and so this is tragedy waiting for a response, not blame, waiting for a response, not blame, to fix it. In one of the old Greek cities, there was an imposing statue, with the word at the base inscribed, “Opportunity.” It had a human form that stood tiptoe suggesting that it remained in any one place for merely a moment, and to underline that thought, the ankles, the feet had wings suggesting the speed at which opportunity passes by. So to paraphrase Paul as he wrote to Ephesus, grab your opportunity to serve God in Christ. Grab it when it comes because the days are evil. Look, God has done a lot of good for you, and offered you many blessings over and over again. Don’t let that goodness go to waste for the time in our life is short, and as I continue to paraphrase, God wants us to make good use of our lives. All who claim Christ, we are being called to this opportunity to serve and reveal our faith. Opportunity requires personal responsibility and urgency in action. From a safe distance, we’ve been watching on our TV’s the incredible devastation, and you’ll remember, you’ll remember that horrible moment when Kane, after he kills Abel, and God comes, and asks, “Kane, where is Abel your brother?” Kane lied, and said, “I do not know. Am I my brother’s keeper?” Jesus turned that cynicism, that lie around, and proclaimed we are indeed our brothers’ keepers, and by Jesus’ blood, shed for all, we have brothers we have never met, some may be still waiting on a rooftop, and when the question is raised, “Am I my brother’s keeper?”, I hope that the spirit wells up within you and says, “You bet I am! You bet I am!” and we seize the moment, we seize the chances to do God’s grace, and like the Greek statue immortalized in marble with the word, “Opportunity,” we do not stand frozen, but on the contrary, we are poised and ready to go into action for those who are in desperate need, and to do it in the name of Christ, who has done for us, and when we do, when we send money through UMCOR, which goes dollar for dollar to there, to that actual location and no handling charges, and we already have folks on the scene, and the Red Cross is a good institution, but when we send a team from Main Street in a few weeks after you get trained on the 17th of September, and I feel that we will have a team, because I don’t want my wife to go alone, and I think she’s going whether anybody goes with her or not, when you go, you will witness to some just by being there. You will witness the love of Christ to some who have never seen it in action before, and you will show by just being there the truth of the Christian message and the living nature of God in this world, just by showing up. God came into the chaos of this world. He came in Jesus Christ making peace by serving others with his life, by putting us first. Our church is already there through UMCOR. Our congregation will go in flood buckets and health buckets and in person in a few weeks, I am sure. What will you do? The days do seem evil. The opportunity is now. How then should we live? Amen.