

HERE COMES FRANCES

After the passing of hurricane Charley, I thought it was “safe” to take some time off for continuing education. The history of storms in this area showed that we had a serious hurricane about once every thirty years. What were the odds that another storm would hit our area while I was away in North Carolina?

Well, as it turns out, the odds were not on our side. Each night I watched the TV along with other Floridians. Hurricane Frances was on the way. Finally, I decided that it was necessary to cut my continuing education a day short so that I could be with the ones I loved back home during the time of the storm. My drive home was a long and anxious one. The road into Florida was eerily deserted while the road out, as many of you experienced, was bumper to bumper.

As I drove into town I got a call on my cell phone from Don Debevoise. He wanted to make sure I knew that he wasn't coming to preach for me. He would be “hunkered down” at home. As it turns out, all of us were “hunkered down” last Sunday, and if things don't change, we might be “hunkered down” again this week as well.

I don't have to tell you that these past few weeks have been a time of high anxiety for all of us. The best expression of how most of us feel was captured by one of our members as she fled the storm in Georgia. To alleviate the tension she wrote a poem entitled, Frances. It goes like this,

“Bigger than Texas, wilder than Vegas: the storm, the wind and the rain.
Day after day and night after night, it came and came and came.
Get batteries, they said, get water and food and first aid kit.
Stock up on plywood and shutters that fit.
Stay tuned to the news on the radio,
Wait and see which way it will go.

It's bigger than ever – it's a Three it's a Four.
Don't want to be close when it knocks on your door.
So leave – hit the road, for Pete's sake get out!
Join thousands of others and flee, they shout.
And travel we did, with millions in cars
Who filled all the hotels and motels and bars.

It followed the millions who tried to escape.
And up there in Georgia we just sit and wait.
Will the rain ever stop? Will I ever get home?
If I ever get back I may never roam.
When the wind and rain subside we can try
To travel back home with an eye on the sky.

It wasn't a hoax, for Frances was real.
The winds and the rain arrived with a squeal,
And stayed and stayed as it inched 'cross the state,
Leaving havoc, debris, and news that it's mate
Ivan is lurching down in the isles –
So, for now there's just tension, and not many smiles!!”

Thank you Kay for that bit of doggerel. It made me smile and gave me a bit of relief from the tension. But, beyond the “gallows humor” what should our attitude be when facing the anxious storm?

WHERE IS OUR FAITH?

I want to ask us a question that Jesus first asked some frightened disciples long ago as they struggled against an overwhelming storm. Jesus asked his disciples, "Where is your faith?"

Where is our faith? That question is not so easy to answer during times when the storms approach. Indeed, when there is a struggle to obtain the basics of life, we sometimes forget all about the spiritual side of life.

Anxiety has a way of crowding out every consideration except what we need to do next to prepare. All we can think about is "Maybe Home Depot has a new supply of plywood. I wonder where I might buy a giant roll of duct tape or a generator."

My continuing education this past week was all about training to become an interim pastor. Interim pastors typically serve churches from six months to two years. They specialize in helping churches who have sometimes had a stormy past and are anxious about the future. Since I'm in charge of our Presbytery's committee that deals with interim ministers, I thought it would be a good idea to get some training in this area.

SYSTEMS THEORY

But, I found that this training was also quite applicable to any church encountering a problem or an anxious time. This past week we talked about something called family systems theory. That's a psychological theory that is, in my mind at least, a quite powerful way to describe any social group, including a church.

Simply stated, this theory teaches us that a system is a collection of parts which interact with each other to function as a whole. A church is a system.

If you want a biblical example of this theory, you need look no farther than what Paul had to say about the church. He wrote, "You are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it."

Paul went on to say that the different members of the church are connected just like the parts of a human body are connected. We rejoice together, and we suffer together."

In other words, we're all in the same boat. And sometimes that boat takes on too much water. No matter how hard we row the rains pour down and the waters continue to rise.

And, at times like that, we sometimes become so anxious that we forget why we've come together in the first place. We forget our faith, and in frustration we tend to say things and do things that are not helpful.

I think that today's familiar story suggests some guidance on what to do when the barometric pressure drops and the anxiety rises.

FAITH FOR THE STORM

First, we need to admit our anxiety in the face of the storm. If we always suppress our anxiety and don't talk to each other about it, we will have physical, mental and spiritual problems.

Talking about anxiety was one area in which the disciples excelled. They were in touch with their anxiety. The disciples were always coming to Jesus with those things that made them afraid, and this storm was no exception.

But, just admitting that we're anxious is not enough. Indeed, focusing on our anxiety too much can just bring about a bad situation in which we just feed on each other's fears. A good example, of course, is all the "storm coverage" that has taken place in the last few days.

Someone once said, "Whatever gets your attention gets you."
And that's true. If we focus on our fears they will block out all else in our life.

More than that, we begin to blame our leaders. We project our fears upon others and make them scapegoats for the problem. I would not want Jeb Bush's job these past few months! Too many storms can make things especially tough on our leaders.

In our lesson for today, we see this dynamic at work. Jesus is described as being asleep in the boat as the storm arises. The worried disciples awaken him and shout that they are perishing. But, I really like that way Mark tells this same story. Mark has the disciples waking Jesus and asking him a question, "Don't you care that we are perishing?"

I dare say that some of us have asked that same question, of Jesus and perhaps of other leaders as well. Don't you care about us? Where is all this hurricane relief? I feel all alone in this boat. Don't you know that we are perishing? Our fears tempt us to forget the blessings of the past and focus only on the wind and the waves.

THE SOURCE OF TRUE FAITH

The answer, of course, is to have a faith that overcomes our fear. That's not easy, but it is possible.

But, it is important to remember the source of our faith. We do not have faith in our ability to overcome the storm. Even though several of the disciples were experienced sailors, they were no match for the wind and the waves.

And, so it is with us. We cannot overcome all the storms of life. Some storms will just be too big. We will not find salvation in material wealth. The storm can take that in an instant. We cannot find salvation by trusting our strength and abilities. Even the best and strongest of us will reach a point when we can do no more.

Instead of trusting in our own power, we need to remember that there is always someone in the boat with us who is the master of the wind and the waves.

AN ACTED SERMON

At Montreat we had a worship service based on this passage, and the sermon was not spoken but acted out by volunteers.

Chairs were lined up side by side to represent the boat, and the Presbyterian ministers who played the role of disciples pretended to struggle mightily against the wind and the waves. (To help us visualize the storm other volunteers made storm sounds in the microphones. They even threw cups of water into the audience to help us feel the storm! That was a bit too much.)

Anyway, the minister who played Jesus was a rather jolly, rotund Navy chaplain. The "disciples" anxiously awakened him and this "Jesus" leisurely stretched and asked in a nonchalant fashion what was wrong. The "disciples" cried out, "Don't you see the wind and the waves?" And Jesus said, "Oh, okay. Peace. Be still."

And then the narrator deadpanned into the microphone, "And it was."

You know the reaction we had to this drama. We laughed. It was funny to see Jesus so unconcerned about the wind and the waves while the disciples struggled.

This passage is in one sense a very serious passage. It teaches us that Jesus is Lord of even the wind and the waves. It should evoke in us (as it did with the disciples) a sense of awe and amazement.

And yet I wonder if a little bit of laughter might be in order when we read this passage. I believe that there is such a thing as holy humor. Sometimes laughing, especially at ourselves and our lack of faith can help us see the foolishness of our fears. We see the storm as a tragedy, a reason to be afraid. But, the storm also reminds us that our misplaced priorities and our lack of faith are almost comical.

JESUS HELPS US

As I walked around my neighborhood this past week, you couldn't help but notice that the place still looked like Fort Apache. Windows were boarded up, and in some cases there were cartoons and notes on the plywood. People said things like, "Frances don't come here." The more adventuresome said things like, "Let it blow." But, many of the boards contained religious sentiments like, "Jesus save us or God bless us."

I believe that Jesus does save us and God does bless when the storm comes. No we can't pray the storm into Texas, as tempting as that thought might be. Contrary to what the insurance people say the storm is not an act of God. It is the result of natural phenomena.

But, I believe that Jesus uses this natural tragedy as a way to bring about God. I believe that Jesus still "awakens" to help us in our time of need. The storm is transformed by the presence of his Spirit.

In the storm we have an opportunity to meet and understand Jesus in a deeper way. Jesus uses the storm to help us see what is really important and push us out into the deep waters of mission.

OUR REACTION TO THE STORM

There is only one thing that we can control in the face of the ever present storm and that is our reaction to the storm. We can face the storm with fear or we can face the storm with faith. Jesus encourages us to face the storm with faith.

Many of the churches in our Presbytery have been damaged by the hurricanes of the past week. Most of you have seen the damage to the roof of our steeple and the many trees that were downed by the storms. The Spanish Presbyterian Church in our area, El Buen Vecino is no longer able to occupy their temporary building and they are looking for a place to meet.

Many other churches have been damaged. At our rescheduled Presbytery meeting I am sure we will spend much of time trying to figure out how to help. Many of our members and neighbors still struggle to contend with wind and water damage.

I wonder. Could some or all of these difficulties are really opportunities to be of service in the name of Christ?

I say that we must do more than just wring our hands in fear. Healing won't come from licking our wounds in despair. Healing will come when we bind up the wounds of others. We must awaken

the Spirit of Jesus in our lives. We must use this time to see what God might be doing, how God might be leading us to another place.

Hurricane Ivan may come our way or maybe not. Forecasting the weather is truly an inexact science. But, one thing is sure. Storms of one kind or another will continue to come into our life.

I wish I could say that the followers of Jesus are guaranteed a life free from storms, but that's just not true.

The first disciples had to face many storms with Jesus. The greatest missionary the church has ever known, the apostle Paul, had to face shipwreck, stoning, imprisonment, and finally execution because of his devotion to Christ. The early church faced countless persecutions from the Romans and others. Down through history the story is the same. The storms have just kept on coming.

And yet, as we look back, we can see that even a category 5 storm was no match for the power and promise of God as revealed in Jesus Christ. The apostle Paul put it this way,

"Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?" Romans 8:35 (NRSV)

".... I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Romans 8:38-39 (NRSV)

With the apostle, I too am convinced that nothing in all of creation has the power to separate us from the love of God as revealed in Christ Jesus.

PUTTING OUR WEIGHT DOWN

Old Uncle Oscar took his first plane ride. Knowing that he had been somewhat apprehensive about it, his friends were eager to learn how it went. So, at the first opportunity they asked him if he enjoyed the flight.

"Well," Uncle Oscar said, "it wasn't as bad as I thought it might be. But, I'll tell you this. I never did put my weight down!"

That's how some Christians take the promises of the Bible. They can talk about the love of God that never lets us go, but they have a hard time putting that knowledge into practice. They have trouble with faith. They have trouble "putting all their weight down" on the Lord when the tough times come.

As a result they are plagued with doubts, fears and uncertainties.

Let's decide this day to put all our weight down on the promises of God.

Let us this day in faith boldly cast off to sail our small ships into the deep waters of life. Let us cross over for the unknown of the other side, knowing that God rides with us all the way.

May God give us faith for the journey.

Amen.