

## The Word and the Hurricane

Psalm 103:2-5

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17 Pentecost A

Good Shepherd Lutheran Church

Boise, Idaho

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- 2 Bless the LORD, O my soul,  
And forget not all His benefits:
- 3 Who forgives all your iniquities,  
Who heals all your diseases,
- 4 Who redeems your life from destruction,  
Who crowns you with lovingkindness and tender mercies,
- 5 Who satisfies your mouth with good things,  
So that your youth is renewed like the eagle's. (Psalm 103:2-5)

The words of the psalm seem laughable to Old Adam clinging to a rooftop in Biloxi, Mississippi. If God is so great and so loving, why does the Gulf Coast lie in ruins? If He is so merciful, why have so many died and why are so many dying? Why isn't He healing the diseases or redeeming from destruction? Where exactly are all of those benefits that He supposedly has to give.

Indeed, even so far away from the devastation of Hurricane Katrina, we witness the awesome destruction of one storm on one day. We see the bodies stack up, the looters and the fires. We hear of the loss of life and the violence perpetrated on helpless survivors, hear speculation of more who never made it out of attics as the waters rose. We see thousands displaced, desperate. They've lost everything and, in many cases, still have no idea if others in their families are still alive. It's gruesome. It's ghastly. And there is no doubt that it is all too real.

And so Old Adam screams, "Where is God? Why has He permitted such violence or even afflicted so many so terribly?" If someone demands such answers from you, do you know what to say? Given the text above, we speak of the Word and the hurricane, of God's Law and Gospel in the time of great disaster.

### I. The Law of Disaster

Disasters do not disprove God's Word. In fact, they confirm the Lord's Word in a variety of ways. For one thing, they demonstrate the puniness and limitations of man. We live in an age of technology and structural engineering, where amazing feats are accomplished by man's use of the Lord's gifts on earth. However, man often succumbs to temptation and believes that he can conquer anything, that God has nothing to do with it. Man believes he possesses the strength to outwit and defend himself against every danger. In wake of this devastating hurricane, we have heard all sorts of blame and criticism of this person or that organization. I have little doubt that human beings are perfectly capable of poor responses to disaster; but let us not forget that man is not almighty. The fact remains that a storm struck with such ferocity that man's defenses fell, that cities and towns were swept away like a house built on sand when the rains descended, the floods came and the winds

blew (Mt. 7:27). We therefore repent and remember to hear our Lord's words and do them. We heed His warning, "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal." Where we give thanks for God's gifts that enable us to defend ourselves against storm, we also recognize that they are not our salvation. We therefore repent of trusting in manmade things for safety, and declare in our confession of sins, "Our help is in the name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth" (Ps. 124:8).

We also witness the disorder and see God's Word confirmed again. His Law is a necessary curb against evil, and He puts authorities in place to enforce that law and curb the evil. Where the law cannot be enforced, lawlessness takes over. Thus we have witnessed the lootings, assaults and all sorts of vicious attacks. This also confirms the doctrine of original sin, that man's desires are naturally selfish and sinful. Those who deny that doctrine have tried to explain that we simply need to understand those who are stealing from and assaulting their neighbor. First and foremost, sinners do not need understanding. They need law; and should they repent, then Gospel. And while you and I may be in better circumstances and better trained against such coarse outbursts of sin like looting, we are no less sinful apart from Christ.

Along with demonstrations of sin, we also see its wages. So many deaths in such short space and time, as we also witnessed four years ago today in New York, fill us with shock and fear. Sure, we know, all die, but the primitive and sometimes barbaric conditions we witness in New Orleans leave us shaken that society is breaking down. Death plays no favorites, but takes young and old, man and woman, criminal and innocent bystander. What we see, however, is a glimpse of what the world would be like at all times, in all places, were it not for the Lord's restraining hand. Indeed, if the Lord allowed sin to run free, the death and grief and disorder we witness now would be the standard, and things would only get worse.

Dear friends, this hurricane in no way proves that God is gone or doesn't care. Rather, it confirms what He declares in His law about the effects and wages of sin in this world. It gives us a tiny glimpse of hell: for while this disorder and terror is a temporary matter in the South, hell is an eternity of the terror and disorder of separation from God and His mercy.

And seeing God's Word confirmed, we also remember our Lord's Word in Matthew 24:

"And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars. See that you are not troubled; for all these things must come to pass, but the end is not yet. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. And there will be famines, pestilences, and earthquakes in various places. All these are the beginning of sorrows" (Matt 24:6-8).

The Lord Jesus declares in His Word that we can expect wars and disasters up until the Last Day, and our current events serve as a poignant reminder: this is a time of war and terror, of natural disasters like tsunami and hurricane, and a time when the Gospel seems to be fading, even among those who declare themselves to be Christians. Does this mean that the Lord will return very soon? We cannot say, for no one knows the day or the hour. However, this may be the day He comes in glory—or your last day, for you may not live to see the sunset. Therefore, live this day and every day as if the Lord will return soon. Shun those sins that you cling to, lest you be found unrepentant when He returns.

In any event, from Scripture we know that such disasters do not contradict the Lord and His Word;

but this is no comfort for those who suffer. It is no great balm to hear, “Be of good cheer, for this disaster is in accord with Scripture!” The question still remains: in such a time as this, where is the Lord to be found? Where is His mercy? Where are His benefits that we are to remember? The answer is in the Gospel. The answer is the Gospel.

## II. The Gospel

Where is Jesus to be found in the time of such great disaster? Where can you be sure He is at work for you? On the cross. No, I don’t mean He remains crucified even today, as we have been crassly accused of teaching. What I mean is this: in the time of natural disaster or national tragedy, you know of God’s mercy and faithfulness because you know of the cross.

You know that, rather than leave you to this chaotic and dying world, God has already given His Son and shed His blood on the cross in order to redeem you. He has sacrificed His Son in order to forgive you your sins and make you His beloved child. You also know that Jesus has died for all the sins of all the world: so that while all must die because of sin, none need be lost—whoever believes and is baptized shall be saved.

Furthermore, you know that He has made you His own in Holy Baptism, joining you in Jesus’ death and also in His resurrection. Therefore, should you die today from natural causes or national calamity, you have the Lord’s sure promise that He will raise you from the dead.

And should you live for many years, you can be certain that the Lord Jesus has not forsaken you. He will continue to give you forgiveness by His Word, even as He feeds you His own body and blood to strengthen and preserve you unto life everlasting. You also bring your kids to Sunday school, that they might hear and learn more of the Lord’s promises and mercy for them. That is why we have Sunday school: not to moralize your children so that they merely act better, but to tell them always of Jesus’ love, that they might cling to the cross no matter what lies ahead.

As you continue in this world, you may also be assured that you are the Lord’s instrument, set free from sin to help your neighbor—be that the one across the street or the one displaced from the Bayou. As you support relief efforts far away, as you support the preaching of the Gospel and Christian education at this church and school, you have the privilege of being the Lord’s instrument by which He continues to preserve order and provide help for those in need.

And you wait with hope. You wait with the Lord’s certain promise that He has forgiven all your iniquities for Jesus’ sake. He has redeemed you from destruction—eternal destruction. He will heal all your diseases when He raises you up from the dead for eternal life on the Last Day.

Back in 1 Kings 19, we find Elijah hiding in a cave, despairing that there is no hope left. The Lord tells him to step outside. There, Elijah witnesses wind so strong that it breaks rocks, followed by a violent earthquake, then raging fire. But the Lord is found in none of those. Instead, the Lord speaks to Elijah in a still small voice, declaring His faithfulness and mercy. So it is for you: despite the horrors you must witness in this world, the Lord still speaks to you in His Word, declaring the cross and His ongoing mercy. There, He promises that He heals you of all your diseases and delivers you from all destruction. How can you be sure that He speaks to you? Because Christ has died for you...and so you are forgiven for all of your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen