

Readings: <http://www.usccb.org/bible/readings/092318.cfm>

Finding Hope in the aftermath of Hurricane Florence.

The last few days have been traumatic for all of us at the East Coast as well people inland who have experienced devastating flooding. We all have stories to share how we fared during the turbulent time. Thank God we are here! When disasters strike, a natural reaction for us religious people is to pray. But it is also natural to wonder, why did God allow this to happen? “Where is God when disaster strikes?” Suffering and tragedy have been part of human experience all through history. Not surprisingly many great characters in the Bible struggled with this question. Job suffered incredibly and for a long time had no answers to his questions. In Psalm 69, the psalmist too felt overwhelmed and confused (Psalm 69:14-15). It is always risky to ask “why” in reference to anything that God does, because we almost never get an answer. But I do believe that Jesus is Emmanuel which means “God with us,” and I also believe that God suffers with every single suffering human being, because **God is love**.

John’s gospel tells us “God so loved the world, that he sent his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.” (Jn3:16) Although there is evil in the world and bad forces that are so powerful but God is still sovereign. Sovereign means God is in overall control. So, we come back to the pertinent question, where was God?

God was with those trying to evacuate before the storm, helping them to leave behind their possessions in order to save their lives. God was with those who stayed behind because they could not leave for whatever reason. God was with those emergency service personnel who stayed behind to be first responders. God was with all those whose lives were lost, bringing them home to Love’s eternal embrace. God is with those who continue to struggle to survive, saving them through the efforts of hundreds of law enforcement and disaster relief personnel. God is with all those people across US and around the world who are giving what they can to help in the relief effort. And God is with us, enabling us to be the Body of Christ, the presence of God in this world here and now.

In his letter to the Romans, St Paul tells us “*Owe nothing to anyone, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.*” (Rom 13:8-10). This disaster calls each of us to think about how we can be God’s hands, God’s feet, and God’s mouthpiece to a world in desperate need. Each of us needs to continue to hold all those whose lives are affected by the hurricane in our thoughts and prayers. It would be a lot easier for us to just forget about it and move forward but love demands otherwise. We need to give whatever we can to help in the relief effort. Finally, we need to be grateful for what we have, and be willing to share whatever we can with those in need. “If one part suffers, all the parts suffers with it; (1Cor.12:26). We are one body, one body in Christ, and we do not stand alone. God is in our midst. God does not desert us in times of tragedy.

This week’s readings shed further light on the contrast between the worldly wisdom that Jesus rebuked in Peter last week, and the wisdom of God, modeled perfectly for us by Christ. They teach us that living as Christian stewards requires us to swim against the tide of our “me-only” culture. Jesus shows us one way in today’s Gospel. “Taking a child, He placed it in their midst, and putting His arms around it, He said to them, ‘Whoever receives one child such as this in my name, receives me, and whoever receives me, receives not me but the One who sent me.’ In this context, Christ is speaking not only of youngsters, but all “little ones,” those who are vulnerable or needy in any way -the brothers and sisters St. Teresa of Calcutta would call “Jesus in distressing disguise.” They are all around us if we open our eyes. Like Jesus, we can put our arms around the most vulnerable ones in our community and channel some of our energy and time towards them.

Dealing with any disaster requires a strong coordinated public and private engagement. There is much appreciation to share, and always it begins with first responders. We thank them for saving lives. The dedication and professionalism of disaster relief personnel never ceases to amaze and they are still carrying out service for many of those still in danger or agony. We thank all federal, state and private organizations such as the Red Cross, Catholic Charities and many others who have contributed services, people, funds and supplies. Finally, my sincere thanks to all of you, staff and volunteers, for stepping up to help those in need. What a gift your help has been and still is!

We are a people of Faith, a people of Hope, and a people of Charity. These charisms have helped us to survive Florence. Let us continue to work together and support each other to rebuild our communities.

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