

AND WHEN THE STORMS CAME

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

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Scripture: Genesis 6:9-22; Matthew 7:21-29

It has been a remarkable season of earth shaking calamity. Friday the collapse of the second construction crane in the city in two months killing workers and destroying homes. On the world scene you would have to live in a cave not to be struck by the global upheavals that have occurred in recent weeks, the cyclone damage in Myanmar, the tornados and flooding in the Midwest, fires in Florida and in the Western states, the terrible loss of life from earthquakes in China - 60,000 dead and 5,000,000 homeless. It is as if the earth is giving way to a kind of massive internal attack upon itself, like an auto-immune response when a body undermines the organs and systems that sustain it.

In reality we know that while some of these calamities may be the result of climate change, human abuse of the creation, and the overpopulation of unstable areas of the earth, much of what the earth is doing is simply *being planet earth*, with geologic plates shifting and quaking, forests firing up and laying waste the green spaces, winds and rains that are the inevitable result of the earth's pull and spin.

This does not in any way diminish the culpability of the human conspiracy against the delicate balance of the creation, nor does it fully explain the tragedy of the loss of human life in Sichuan Province, or in Myanmar. But it does remind us of our *place* as but one of the many species and creatures of the earth, subject to the movements and sweep of the earth's heave and throw. We may be a dominating force on earth, we human beings, but there are other forces in the Creation as well that are greater than we and even less predictable.

We may rightly wonder in the face of all these cataclysms, where is God, and what is God's role in all of this if God is the Great Original, the Creator, Sustainer, and Protector of heaven and earth and all that is? The waves are so high, after all, and our boat is so small.

The texts assigned by the lectionary today almost collide with differing perspectives on the role of God in the creation and they ponder whether God does affect the earth's changes and upheavals, and if so whether or not we dare take refuge in this terrible one whom we are told even the winds and the waves obey.

The 46th Psalm reminds us that "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble... though the earth be moved, though the mountains quake in the heart of the sea... God is our refuge and strength." Comforting words. We all want to believe in a God like that.

But then the Genesis lesson comes along and stands in stark contrast, reminding us of a different time and a terrible flood that God sent upon the earth when God had enough of our rebellion and God said, "I have determined to make an end of all flesh." So God opened the locks on the tidal basins of heaven and drained them out, flooding the earth, leaving only a remnant of every creature that once walked or flew or crept or dug upon the face of the earth. Fortunately Noah and a small sampling of his immediate

family were among the creatures that were saved, so that we might be here to remember the story.

But the bottom line is the lingering question of whether we can really trust this God who is our refuge and strength, in whose hands our fate is cast and our days are numbered. So which is it? A vengeful, angry God, given to fits of destruction like a four year old who knocks down the carefully constructed castle of blocks, frustrated and bored? Or is this the tender hearted, loving God whose kindly embrace welcomes us home after we have gone a-wandering?

At the end of the Genesis flood, God repents of the destruction that has been wrought and makes a promise to humankind, “Never again.” The rainbow in the sky is given as a sign of that pledge that the destruction is over and the covenant is renewed that “the [Mighty One] who stands behind the creation will ultimately act to save.”¹

But as Spalding, chaplain at Williams College writes, “Is this really how people hear these flood stories? [That the Mighty One who stands behind the creation will ultimately act to save? Especially in light of the suffering faces we have seen filling our newspapers for weeks now?] The rainbow... [is] a rather ethereal arch on which to hang the promise of a benevolent deity. [After all,] Whether or not one can even see a rainbow is entirely contingent upon our happening to be in the right relationship to the source of light as we stare into the storm.”²

Jesus knew something of the winds and the waves, the desert and the dry land. He and the disciples more than once were caught by nature’s forces when a sudden storm bore down upon the sea and threatened their lives. In the blistering heat of the desert Jesus tested his soul after his baptism, exposed to the worst that the sand and the sun can do. At Jesus’ death, the earth grew dark and quaked.

Versed as he was in the ways of the earth, it should be no surprise that Jesus picks up on the flood theme and concludes his Sermon on the Mount with these words,

Everyone who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on a rock. The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on a rock. And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell – and great was its fall.

Anyone who has visited the Palestinian lands will know that the *wadis* in the springtime are engorged with water, and what might have seemed a good dry place to build a few months earlier, becomes instead a flood plain as the rushing rapids of the spring rains descend through the valleys at lightning speed. Whereas the rocky soil around Jerusalem and its hills might be firmer land on which to build.

There’s no doubt in my mind that given a choice between being wise and being foolish, I would want to build my house on rock, with deep set foundations, pilings sunk in, brick and stone holding together well pointed mortar.

Of course, the parable of the two houses, one built on rock, and the other built on sand, is not just practical advice on architectural engineering. It is a key to understanding

how to endure the storms of life that will most assuredly come our way, and the resources on which we can rely when the clouds are forming.

All of us have houses that we have built to provide us security against the storms of adversity in life. “There are many houses in the human community,” says Tom Long in his commentary on our text. And he’s right. “The house of [accumulated] wealth washes away when the rains of economic crisis come,” just ask the folks at Bear Stearns.

“The house of power collapses when the political climate changes,” just ask Scott McClellan, President Bush’s former press secretary.

“The house of pragmatic living-for-the-moment slips off the foundation when life opens up with a mystery like birth, deep suffering, or death.”³ It is only those who “strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness,” says Jesus, who are able to build a dwelling that tempests cannot shake and the gates of hell cannot destroy.

There is not anyone here of a certain age who has not wondered what would happen if the foundations upon which their life has been secured began somehow to crumble. The most certain of all certain things in your life, what might they be? Work, marriage, your love of another, your children, your health, your emotional well-being, your retirement savings. Whatever it is that seems bedrock to you, can, and if human experience is any teacher, eventually will begin to erode.

You hardly notice when the first wind separates the sand around the foundation. You barely pay attention to that first creak you hear in the house one night as you lay upon your pillow, the one that suggested the foundation was settling a bit too much. We hardly notice when it begins.

I have thought a lot about these upheavals in life lately. Because life has a way of coming at you even when you’re trying to stay on the sidelines and out of the way. And if there is anything that the calamities of recent days around the world have shown us - as if 9/11 had not taught us this lesson already - at the heart of things there is finally no hiding from what life may do to all of us. We are but creatures in the great order of things. Beloved creatures, crowned with glory and honor, yes, but creatures nonetheless, vulnerable and fragile in so many ways. So it’s not a matter of preparing for the storms *if* the storms come, but preparing for the storms *when* they come, or better said, *before* they come, as they most assuredly will come to all of us.

It was St. Augustine who said that Christians are not distinguished from unbelievers by the manner of ills they suffer, but rather by the manner in which they suffer their ills.

In the parable of the two houses, one is built on sand and the other on rock, and while I would like to think that after the winds had died and the clouds had lifted and the storm was over, the one whose house was built on rock still stood, that would be the rainbow version of the parable, the one that ends happily ever after. But I grew up in the Midwest and lived through some of those storms. I have seen the sky turn green and the twisters bear down and heard the wind coming at me like a locomotive tearing everything in its path apart. And all of us who have read the news and seen the reports and watched the accounts can testify to the fact that in reality the storm often takes everything tangible away.

That is, I think, what sets this parable apart from simplistic architectural advice about where best to lay the foundations when building a house. For those who would follow Jesus, and pattern their lives after his, there is a different kind of foundation that must be laid, a different kind of pylon that is sunk in the rock.

The wise one in the parable is the one who knows that there are no guarantees of safety on *either* building lot. It is not what is above the surface that is enduring in the parable, but what is below the surface, sunk deep in the foundation, the footprint that holds its place secure. Jesus, after all, explained to us the parameters and requirements of faith, the unreliability of happy endings and rainbow sightings. *Blessed are those who are persecuted...* he said. *The one who would save his life must lose it...* he warned us. *Anyone who would come after me must deny himself, take up his cross and follow...* he said.

Rick Spalding puts it this way, The truth is that “All architecture notwithstanding, when the floods come, there is little that can save the empty-hearted. And when the floods come there is nothing that can shake the one whose heart of hearts is surely fixed where true joys are to be found.”⁴

The question then, is how deep is your love of God? How great is your trust? Not so much in the sunlight of high noon, but hunkered down in the basement with the water rising and the tornado rolling by overhead, and everything cracking and prying loose. Your sure and certain hope must be sunk deep enough in the foundation that is laid in rock, that when the storms come, and the floods roll down, and the winds have done what they will, you yet may find that secret dwelling place secure at the core of all things that is the habitation of the Most High.

That is, I think what our faith is all about. Not an insurance policy against disaster, but an enduring foundation sunk deep in the rock that is our fortress and our strength.

I have probably told this story before, but sometimes in the family you can tell stories again and they are still welcome. My mother in her latter years was living in a nursing home in Sparks, Nevada where Alzheimer’s disease took its toll on her. As the years went by, she lost her sense of place and time and person, until finally she lost any clear recognition of even me.

Our rare visits always began with chocolate bars that I brought her and that she generously offered to others as I rolled her around the halls of her nursing facility in her wheelchair. She seemed content to do this as long as we kept moving, going somewhere. Her thoughts and words would take her back thirty and fifty years as I alternately became in her mind her husband, a nice stranger, or someone vaguely familiar, she wasn’t sure who.

It’s hard to watch your mother slip away like that, bit by bit, memory by memory, but that’s the way it is with this pernicious disease.

One time I visited her on a Sunday afternoon and I discovered that there was a small vespers service being held in the dining hall. Elderly people in wheelchairs had been brought from their rooms in various states of dress and undress, some wearing a bit of lunch on their sweater, or a drop of soup on their tie. A motley group of twenty five or

so, rolled to the tables where later dinner would be served, blended for some, and soft for others.

It was a garish place to worship, the florescent lights and Formica tops to the tables made it a bit sterile. We were led in worship by a local evangelical pastor who did his best against the odds to make some theological sense with these dear souls, many of whom had lost all sense of cognitive reasoning long ago.

The pastor's wife was playing the piano, and, as one might expect, the music spoke more eloquently to this particular congregation than did the brief sermon. Folks joined in as much as memory allowed on tunes like *The Old Rugged Cross*, *Amazing Grace*, and *Jesus Loves Me This I Know*.

My mother seemed disinterested in these proceedings. She fidgeted with her purse, took everything out and placed it on the table; gum, a comb, a bobby pin, a small powder puff, a few coins, and then she carefully put everything back in again, close her purse, open it, and start the whole process all over again.

Every now and then she would suggest to me that we ought to be going, but I was determined to wait out the last few minutes of this home spun service, at least for the closing benediction.

Towards the end the pastor offered a prayer for everyone; their health, their loved ones, their peace of mind and spirit, and in seamless transition invited the congregation to join him in saying the Lord's Prayer. So people started in, "Our father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name..." And it was precisely then that my mother began to say flawlessly the words of that prayer that she had taught me as a child. Like the good Methodist that she was, she even said, "trespasses and those who trespass against us..."

It was just one of those incredible moments of grace that you don't get very often. Out of the mush of her gray matter, she remembered the Lord's Prayer. Exactly the closing benediction that I had needed but not expected. I looked up and saw her saying those words, that were somehow sunk deep in the foundation of her life, immovable and sure. No matter what ravages and storms had come her way, no matter how many floods of empty thoughts had rolled through her head, no matter how lost she might be in the tempest, deep inside her there was still this bedrock, this foundation, this certainty.

My mother died later that year. But I have never forgotten that sign that I saw and heard that day, that deep within she still could find her way to that sure abiding place where God was her refuge and strength.

I hope and pray that whatever happens to us, and of course anything may, we all may find our way to that deep foundation sunk in the rock, where God abides, our refuge and our strength.

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¹ Walter Brueggemann, et.al., *Texts for Preaching* (Year A) (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995) p. 346.

² Richard Spalding, Moveable Feast Paper for Ordinary 9 (Proper 4) unpublished.

³ Thomas G. Long, Matthew. Westminster Bible Companion. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997) p. 84

⁴ Spalding, Op. cit. p.6.