

17th Sunday After Pentecost, September 11, 2005, Liturgical Year "A"

ST. BARTHOLOMEW'S CHURCH IN THE TOWN OF TONAWANDA, NY

The Rev. Fr. Arthur W. Ward, Jr. + Rector

"The Truth Amidst the Chaos"

KATRINA AND 9/11

It has been another one of those times. In the last two weeks we have seen a devastating storm and its catastrophic aftermath. A million people left homeless, hundreds of thousands psychologically and physically debilitated and an untold number killed. We have witnessed the bungling response of government bureaucracy at work, as well as the heroic effort of rescuers saving thousands stranded on rooftops and in homes. We have seen the worst of sinful human nature and we have witnessed the best of the human spirit working in conjunction with the Holy Spirit.

And what I find very interesting is that Hurricane Katrina, the worst natural disaster in US history came only eight months after the West Asian Tsunami, one of the worst natural disasters in human history. And on top of that, today, 9/11 marks the four year anniversary of the worst terrorist attack in American history. All of this coming at the beginning of the 21st century. When we reached the year 2000, who knew these things were on the horizon?

And even though we live in a world that seems to move faster and faster, where it is hard to keep up with everything that is going on around us and where we are bombarded with tragedy after tragedy, one truth remains in the midst of the chaos and the uncertainty. We heard it in our Psalm this morning. **Ps. 103: 15-17:** *"Our days are like the grass; we flourish like a flower of the field; when the wind goes over it, it is gone, and its place shall know it no more. But the STEADFAST LOVE of the Lord endures forever on those who fear Him, and his righteousness on children's children."*

The truth is this life of ours is fleeting, it is temporary, and it is coming to an end. And our physical demise can happen at any time, it can happen without a moment's notice. But even in the midst of this grim reality, the truth is that God's love is still there. In fact it is there forever upon those who fear Him.

WHERE IS GOD?

And yet there are many who like to say where is God when a natural disaster strikes or when a man made tragedy like 911 happens. They like to point the finger at God as if He somehow is the problem. As if He somehow bears full responsibility. It is tempting you know. Especially if you have suffered great loss. I mean, we only have to deal with some high gas prices here in Western New York, our fellow citizens of the Gulf Coast, they have to deal with just plain survival. They have to deal with the loss of their livelihood, their homes, even some their loved ones.

I am reminded of what NPR Senior News Analyst, Daniel Schorr, said on his 89th birthday (August 31). The subject was evolution and intelligent design. He observed that President Bush had "staked out a non-position" on the debate between evolution and intelligent design. Bush had said that "both sides ought to be properly taught in the schools of America." Then, with manifest scorn, Schorr linked the devastation of Hurricane Katrina with the concept of intelligent design. Schorr lamented, "[Bush] might well have reflected that, if this was the result of intelligent design, then the designer has something to answer for."

Well the truth is the God doesn't have something to answer for; we have something to answer for. Many get all upset over a tragedy like Katrina, but when one person dies, when that one child who will die today in the hospital dies, that's total for that one child. It wouldn't make any difference if 100,000 more died at the same time. We think somehow because so many perish at one time, then something has gone wrong. Well, something has gone wrong, if one anywhere perishes. And I'll tell you what has gone wrong, it's a world cursed by sin. God told Adam and Eve, "***Cursed is the ground for your sake.***" We do not live in paradise and this world will never become paradise. We live in a world that is cursed by sin and all nature bears that curse. Hurricanes aren't the problem (they play a necessary role for balancing the world's climate), suffering and death is the problem.

And yet, even with the curse of death and dying, God's love is still there. And I want us to reflect for a moment on three key aspects of His love for us.

GOD'S LOVE WARNS US OF IMPENDING DANGER

First, God's love warns us of impending danger.

The warning signs were there for the city of New Orleans. Listen to what Bishop Charles Jenkins, Episcopal Bishop of Louisiana wrote to his fellow bishops two days before the storm hit: He said, "*A request for prayers would be deeply appreciated. A category 4 storm hit on New Orleans would destroy our below-sea level city and likely end it. Tens of thousands of urban poor and elderly do not have the means to evacuate. The death toll will be phenomenal. A category 3 storm would put more than 20 feet of water in the city.... So, a plea for prayers would be appreciated. Pray for us.*"

Just like the warning signs were there for our nation before the 911 attack.

But there is something more important going on here besides reflecting on warning signs before particular disasters. The truth is they are part of a greater warning for all of us. And that is the warning that we need the Lord each and every day, a warning not to trust in the technology or in the feats of mankind. A warning that big brother isn't always going to be there, that government can not solve or deal with all the problems this life brings, a warning not to trust in this world or this life. God says: YOU NEED ME; You will not survive without ME.

And it is this truth that reflects God's love. You see if you love someone, you will warn them of impending danger. God warns us, doesn't He? God's Word is full of warnings. People like to talk of Hurricane Katrina as a disaster of biblical proportions. How about a warning of Biblical proportions.

You see God doesn't hide the truth from us, He tells us the truth, He shows us the truth, He warns us repeatedly of the dangers of this world. In fact, God's laws are warnings.

The first words of Jesus' ministry were a warning: "***Repent for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand.***" (Mt. 4:17) Jesus called us to always be ready for His return. He said "***Be on the alert, for you do not know which day your Lord is coming.***" (Mt. 24:42) Jesus warned us of false teaching when He said, "***Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees.***" (Mt. 16:6).

St. Peter warned in **1 Peter 5:8**: "***Be sober, keep alert, your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour.***

In other words be prepared, get right with God, walk with Him talk with Him serve Him. God loves us so much that He warns us! But not only does God warn us, He constantly reminds us that He is always with us.

GOD’S LOVE PROMISES THAT HE IS ALWAYS WITH US

Jesus said on the night before He died, *“In this world you will have tribulation. But take courage, I have overcome the world.”* (Jn. 16:33). Jesus also said, *“Peace I leave with you, My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your heart be troubled, nor let it be fearful.”* (Jn. 14:27). Why could Jesus say such things? The Holy Spirit. For Jesus promised that He would not leave us as orphans but that He would ask the Father and the Father would send us the Holy Spirit to be with us forever (Jn. 14:16 -18). In other words Jesus is assuring us that whatever the storm, whatever the trial we face, it will be ok. Through the Holy Spirit, He will be with us and that’s all we need. And then when Jesus left this earth, before He ascended into heaven, He reiterated this truth when He said after giving the Disciples the Great Commission to go into the world to make other disciples: *“...and I am with you always even to the end of the age.”* (Mt. 28:20).

Christ is with us. The Holy Spirit is with us. No matter where we are, where we go, what we do, no matter what happens to us, the Lord is with us. That’s why David could say in Ps. 23:4-6: *“Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I shall fear no evil, thy rod and thy staff they comfort me. Thou preparest a place before me. My cup runneth over. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.”*

God is always there. And God becomes more real to us when we are with our brothers and sisters in Christ. Jesus said in Mt. 18:20: *“When two or three are gathered together in my name, there I am in their midst.* When we are in fellowship with one another, we are in fellowship with the Lord.

I will tell you something else that is true about God’s love.

GOD’S LOVE CALLS US TO REACH OUT TO THOSE IN NEED

God’s love calls us to reach out to those in need: both those in spiritual need and those in physical need.

When you look at the people who lived in New Orleans and their response to the storm, there were five types of people. And these five types of people are the same five types of people when it comes to spiritual truth and their relationship with God.

First, there were those who heard the warnings to leave and they heeded those warnings and they left. Praise God that eighty percent of the residents of the Gulf Coast left their homes. Praise God that we and many millions upon this earth have heeded God’s warning to repent.

Second, there were those who didn’t believe reports that the hurricane would hit, they didn’t believe the warning. And you know there are a lot of people out there who don’t believe God’s Word, who don’t believe the gospel. When Jesus went to his hometown, we are told in that He wouldn’t perform any miracles because of their unbelief. Jesus even marveled at their unbelief.

17th Sunday After Pentecost, September 11, 2005, Liturgical Year “A”

The third group of people you could find in New Orleans were those who refused to leave because they didn't like the government telling them what to do. They had what could be called a “rebellious

spirit.” And you know it is no different in the spiritual realm. There are people in our world, who even if they see the work of God, will still turn their backs on God because they don't like the idea of someone telling them what to do, they want to be in control of their own lives no matter what.

Fourth, there were those who stayed because they thought they could survive the hurricane on their own. They had enough supplies; maybe they were on higher ground. Whatever the case they thought they could handle it. Many people are like that when it comes to their spiritual life. They may believe in a God, they may recognize a higher power, but they think they can handle life without really relying on or trusting in the Lord.

And then finally, there were still others who wanted to leave but couldn't because they didn't have the means or the ability to get out. Brothers and sisters it is this last group that should wake us up to why it is so important to reach out to our neighbors who are in need. Because there are many who do want to know the truth, who do want to believe, who do want to know their purpose in life, who want to know the Savior of our world and universe, but they're waiting to be told. They are waiting to hear and experience the love of God in Christ. And the only way they will find out, the only way they will have that purpose and peace and understanding, is if we do our part. For in this short natural life of ours we are God's hands and we are His feet. And we have been given the responsibility to help our brothers and sisters in need, both physically and spiritually.

Just like the members of the US Coast Guard were saving all those people from the rooftops of their homes one by one, not stopping, but pressing on, so too we are called to help our neighbors, one by one. Don't fall into the trap of looking at all the lost in our world and feeling overwhelmed. We need to ask ourselves whom can I help? Who is in my sphere of influence? We can help save others by doing it one person at a time. Winning them to Christ one by one. Won by one. That's what it's all about.

As Frank Wright, President of the National Religious Broadcasters aptly noted, “As important as it is to meet tangible human needs, the ultimate tragedy would be to be rescued from mortal ills only to perish everlastingly without Christ.”

So as we continue to deal with the after effects of this terrible storm, as we continue to deal with the scourge of terrorism in our world, may we never forget the words of **Ps. 103: 15-17**: *“Our days are like the grass; we flourish like a flower of the field; when the wind goes over it, it is gone, and its place shall know it no more. But the steadfast love of the Lord endures forever on those who fear Him...”*

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. AMEN!