

In the Aftermath of Hurricane Katrina

September 4, 2005

I was stunned as I repeatedly heard the residents of New Orleans and the Gulf Coast referred to as “refugees” throughout this current crisis in our nation. The United States has taken in refugees from Southeast Asia, Africa, Central America, and other areas of the world. But it was startlingly to think of the United States creating refugees. Yet that indeed is the experience of the tens of thousands of people who are displaced from their homes, whose jobs have disappeared, who have no school to attend, no clothes to wear, no food to eat or water to drink.

I was drawn to several biblical images. The first is from the book of Joel. A devastating locust infestation has taken place. The entire population, including animals, is ravaged. In the face of this natural disaster, the prophet calls the people to repentance and prayer. Joel says, “Put on sackcloth and lament, you priests; wail, you ministers of the altar.... Sanctify a fast, call a solemn assembly. Gather the elders and all the inhabitants of the land to the house of the Lord your God, and cry out to the Lord” (Joel 1:13-14).

All of the people are called to stop and take note of this economic disaster. The priests are to lead the people in prayers of lament, mourning, and fasting. All segments of society are to be united in deep, soul-searching reflection, which will make them more contemplative and compassionate people.

Lament is the biblical language of sorrow, protest, and contrition. It is the voice given to anger, doubt, and pain. The wisdom of scripture is that people need to mourn in order to be comforted; they need to confess to be forgiven, and we need to doubt in order to receive assurance. We pour out our troubles to God so that God can release the power of love and justice. Lament is a communal prayer expressing sorrow about the brokenness of life. Eventually lament issues in praise, but our country is still in deep anguish.

As we have watched images of distraught people bereft of everything they had owned, separated from their family members, totally dependent upon the mercy of others, we have wept with them. Desperate for survival, too distraught to pray, we are called to pray for them prayers of lament, with the Psalmist:

“Save me, O God, for the waters have come up to my neck.
I sink in deep mire, where there is no foothold;
I have come into deep waters, and the flood sweeps over me.

I am weary with my crying; my throat is parched.
My eyes grow dim with waiting for my God” (Ps. 69:1-3).
It is a time to lament, to mourn, to weep.

In the face of disaster, Joel also calls the people to fast. “Declare a holy fast.” Fasting is the spiritual discipline of abstaining from something in order to devote our attention or energies more fully to God. Fasting from meals helps us to focus on our hunger for God. In our culture, there are many things beyond food which distract us from God and God’s desires for our lives and our life together. Joel’s call to fast in the face of natural disaster is a call to step back from all that keeps us preoccupied, diverted, and running from God. It is a call to examine our priorities, to take stock of what is truly important in life and living. It is a call to consider God’s dream for our life together.

The prophet Isaiah is more specific about the kind of fast God desires. From Eugene Peterson’s translation, we hear:

“This is the kind of fast day I’m after:
to break the chains of injustice,
get rid of exploitation in the workplace,
free the oppressed,
cancel debts.

What I’m interested in seeing you do is:
sharing your food with the hungry,
inviting the homeless poor into your homes,
putting clothes on the shivering ill-clad,
being available to your own families.

Do this and the lights will turn on,
and your lives will turn around at once.

Your righteousness will pave your way.

The God of glory will secure your passage.” (Isaiah 58:6-8,
The Message).

The prophet calls us to fast from life pursuits that turn us inward. God asks that in the emptiness created by this fast we become filled not with our own luxuriant desires, but with the crying needs of the poor. This kind of fast sears away all preoccupation with self, gain, grasping, and possessing.¹ This fast binds us together in community, for only if we fast together as a nation will this fast be filled.

New Orleans has a poverty rate of 28% - more than twice the national rate. Life is always harder for the poor. They are those least likely to have

property insurance, health insurance, cars, or savings accounts. When jobs are lost because of natural disasters, theirs are the first to go. Poverty makes long-term recovery after a disaster more difficult - the communities that are the weakest to begin with usually recover the slowest. The lack of a living family income for most people in those communities leaves no reserve for emergencies.²

God calls upon us to live simply so that others may simply live. Our nation is facing a crisis that demands the sacrifice and cooperation of all citizens. We have an opportunity to demonstrate our solidarity with our brothers and sisters. We have a grand opportunity to exercise simpler living and sacrificial giving, so that others might simply survive. We can do it in small ways and our national leaders can call us to do so in larger ways.

Already as a nation we are responding in generous ways to the overwhelming needs in the Gulf Coast.

I want to lift up some of the ways in which the United Methodist Church is responding.³ Bishops in Louisiana and Mississippi have been meeting with representatives of the United Methodist Committee on Relief to mobilize resources and volunteers. UMCOR has many years of experience in disaster relief and recovery with a unique focus. While other denominations and agencies focus on immediate and short-term response and projects, UMCOR is committed to a distinctive range of projects from immediate care to long-term case management using a high-level of resources and volunteers. UMCOR also has experience in refugee issues that will be critical in states outside the disaster area as thousands of people find temporary housing for an extensive period of time.

Immanuel United Methodist Church is a church of 150 members a couple of hours west of New Orleans in Lafayette, LA. It has made good on our theme of open doors and open hearts. They have taken in 27 evacuees from New Orleans, 18 of whom are children. Church members have taken the evacuees into their homes to bathe and have a meal. The church is also serving three meals a day from their food pantry. The evacuees are sleeping in Sunday school rooms and the sanctuary. The 18 children have been enrolled in Lafayette local schools, which will provide them with uniforms, school supplies, and emergency food stamps.

Rev. Ray Stokes, pastor of Trinity United Methodist Church, rode out the storm in Gulf Port, MS, and is now reaching out to others there as well. With no electricity and no water, he and members of his church who are still in Gulf Port are feeding hundreds using their church's gas stove. They are receiving relief supplies that are helping them feed the people who come by each day for food. Through word of mouth people are finding out how to

have a hot lunch at this local United Methodist Church. On Thursday, they fed approximately 300 people.

The Arkansas Annual Conference is mobilizing United Methodist churches and camps to reach out to the tens of thousands of displaced people currently residing in Arkansas and for those yet to arrive. The conference is working with the governor's office in offering shelter and getting buses to New Orleans for the evacuation happening there.

The Lakeview Camp in Texas is hosting 107 adults with mental disabilities from a New Orleans home.

Dillard University on New Orleans is one of eleven historically black United Methodist colleges. It has been flooded with five to eight feet of water. Emmanuel Galloway carried only clothes as he and some 250 other Dillard University students fled the wrath of Hurricane Katrina. He watched in horror as one of their buses caught fire, destroying the few belongings those students were taking from New Orleans to Centenary College in Shreveport, La.

Churches, individuals and businesses in Shreveport donated food, clothes, and toiletries, and provided buses, cab fare, and plane fare to get students home. "This is seeing people who walk their faith and live it," said Freddie Hill, vice president for campus life at Dillard. "We've seen day-to-day miracles. We needed a bus to take students home; a church gave us a bus," Hill said. One man paid \$900 for three cabs to drive students home to Dallas.

Some colleges are offering free semesters or in-state tuition, and others, including Centenary, extending fall enrollment for students affected by the hurricane. Lon Morris Junior College, a UM-related institution in Jacksonville, TX, is taking in freshman and sophomore students who will be able to continue their education free of charge while New Orleans recovers.

The Texas Annual Conference has pledged \$1 million toward relief efforts. Our Bishop has reminded us of the \$70,000 sent to our Annual Conference by the Mississippi Conference when the Loma Prieta earthquake struck in 1989.

But will we sustain the response for the long-haul, for the years it will take to rebuild infrastructure, cities, workplaces, homes, schools, public services, and the lives of thousands not only bereft of possessions and livelihood, but also emotionally traumatized? This is the kind of fast that God requires of us.

Our corporate fasting as a nation will eventually evolve into the hope of homecoming which God promised to the Israelite people in the sixth century before the Christian era. Their nation had been overrun by Babylon

and the citizens of Israel were deported hundreds of miles from their homes. Their place of worship was destroyed. For years they lived in exile in a foreign land.

But through the prophet Isaiah, God spoke to them a word of hope: “No more will anyone call you Rejected, and your country will no more be called Ruined. You’ll be called ‘My Delight,’ and your land Beulah (‘Married’), Because God delights in you and your land will be like a wedding celebration....Walk out of the gates. Get going! Get the road ready for the people. Build the highway. Get at it! Clear the debris, hoist high a flag, a signal to all peoples! Yes! God has broadcast to all the world: ‘Tell daughter Zion, ‘Look! Your Savior comes, Ready to do what he said he’d do, prepared to complete what he promised.’ Zion will be called new names: Holy People, God-Redeemed, Sought-Out, City-Not-Forsaken” (Isaiah 62:4, 10-12, *The Message*).

That vision of restoration and hope is the message we need to proclaim to the people of the Gulf Coast. It’s a message we need to embody with our hearts, our hands, our feet, and our gifts.

¹ Stephen V. Doughty, “A Searing, Corporate Fast,” *Weavings*, September/October 2004, p. 32.

² Jim Wallis, *SojoMail*, August 31, 2005.

³ Thanks the the United Methodist News Service and the website of United Methodist Committee on Relief.

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