

"The Strange Call of God"

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida

8/22/04

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#### DOROTHY DAY

Dorothy Day was only eight years old when something happened that would shape the rest of her life. For many months she had dreams about God, and that night was no exception.

But, her dreams of God were not some beatific vision. Instead, they were nightmares of sound and power. She wrote, "A great noise became louder and louder and nearer and nearer to me, until I woke up sweating, screaming for my mother."

On that fateful night, the dream was the same except this night as she awoke, the brass bed was rolling across the floor and the earth was shaking. It was April 18, 1906, and the great earthquake of the century had struck San Francisco. The earthquake lasted only a minute and forty seconds, but it was in the aftermath of that great earthquake that she finally began to understand this strange call from God.

She wrote, "While the crisis lasted, people loved each other. It was as though they were united in Christian solidarity. It makes one think of how people could, if they would, care for each other in times of stress" without judging "in pity and love."

In the case of Dorothy Day, a whole life's work was determined by one opportune moment. God called her through the earthquake, and she responded by founding a work of Christian charity that stretched across the country. She and other Catholic workers cared for the poorest of the poor, and the organization she founded is still in existence.

#### CALLED BY A HURRICANE?

Dorothy's story got me thinking. If Dorothy could be called through an earthquake, I wonder if we could be called by a hurricane. I know. It sounds far fetched, but think with me for a moment on this one.

A week ago Friday I'm sure quite a few people "got religion." At least they used God's name more often as hurricane Charlie blew through our area. He was only a category two on the hurricane scale when he hit us, nothing like the monster Andrew. But, he packed enough punch.

As I looked out the back door, my wife said, "There goes the dog house, and the fence and the tree. Oh my." My son bopped into the room about that time and with the fearlessness of youth said, "Cool."

I understand. There is something exciting about the storm, the power that is so much greater than us. With flashlights we made our way into the yard and assured our neighbors that we were all right. And then we got the first fleeting glimpse of the damage. Do we have any shingles left on our roof?

But, after an hour of excitement, we were left with the not so cool job of cleanup and recovery. The next hot day dawned early, and it was hard to know where to begin. No air conditioning. No phone. No nothing.

I drove to the church to see if there was significant damage and saw trees all over the place. It looked like we had been bombed, but fortunately the church was basically in tact. What was broken could be fixed, but it would be a long time before I could account for everyone and learn how my congregation weathered the storm.

We had a brief service last week. It had to be brief so folks wouldn't suffer too much in a hot church. The windows in this church will not go up to let in a breeze.

And so it went day after scorching day.

I'm sure all of you have your stories to tell. Most of us got by okay with just a few trees down and screen rooms damaged. I understand that some of you are trying to grow oak trees in your swimming pools. A few of us had the misfortune of losing a roof, a business and in at least one case a church member was injured trying to make storm repairs.

But, by and large, we are all just grateful that God preserved our lives in the storm.

#### ACT OF GOD?

The insurance companies call an event like this an "act of God." I guess there is some truth to that statement. A powerful storm like this is a reminder of our mortality and how our puny technology is nothing compared to the might of God' creation.

But, I think we see the work of God best in what happens after the storm.

Power crews from all over the Southeast have been working with our own people day after day in the hot Florida sun. Law enforcement, city and county workers are working incredibly hard for long hours.

People with badly damaged homes still take time to help a neighbor in need. Blood donations are up. Gifts are arriving from all over the country to help us in the recovery effort.

I know. There are also the guys who want to use this disaster as an opportunity to make a shady buck. But, by and large, I have observed what Dorothy observed after the San Francisco earthquake. In the crisis, I have observed people helping each other in kindness and love, and I have asked myself once again,

"Why can't we be like this more often?

Isn't this truly what the kingdom of God is all about?"

This past Friday four young men with chain saws from Eastminster Presbyterian Church at Indialantic Beach drove up and helped us clean our parking lot of trees and debris. Presbytery and General Assembly are offering financial assistance to our church and to individuals so that needs not met by insurance can be paid.

(By the way, if you have a need, let me know. People in the greater church are literally searching for a way to be of real help to those of us who have been affected by this disaster.)

When I think about all this, I must say that I am proud of the Presbyterian Church and the selfless work that is being done, and I believe that God is working through others and us in the aftermath of the storm.

It's nice to pat ourselves on the back and give well deserved kudos to those serving so selflessly. But, what will we have learned six months from now when the debris is all gone and the homes are all fixed? How will we have changed on account of this experience?

Most of us will be a bit more jumpy when a hurricane warning is posted or the wind blows more violently at night. But, will we remember the kindness of this hour? Will we remember what it felt like to have the Body of Christ come to our aid in so many ways? Experience teaches me that unless we think about it, we will miss the opportunity of this hour.

The storm is our wake up call. I believe that the call of God is embedded in this disaster. I believe that God is teaching us in this hour that individually we are weak, weaker than we would like to think.

But, God is also teaching us that weak people can band together in His name and do great things for the kingdom. We don't have to be victims of the storm. We can use the storm as an opportunity to put things into perspective and hear God's greater call to service and salvation.

#### JEREMIAH'S CALL

Long ago another young man by the name of Jeremiah heard God's call. It was a call to be a prophet in a stormy time. This time the

storm was a political and military storm. But, that made it no less fierce.

Indeed, God's people were facing a storm that threatened to do much more damage than even hurricane Andrew. God's people were in danger of being carried off into captivity by the Babylonians. Everything would be destroyed in the face of this hurricane named "Nebuchadnezzar."

And young Jeremiah was handpicked by God to forecast this particular storm. Jeremiah would bring the bad news of destruction to his people. How would you like to be that weatherman?

Some think that Jeremiah was about eighteen when he received this call from. And he was not a happy camper. Immediately he began making excuses. "I'm too young. I don't speak well." He probably would have said more, but I imagine God cut Jeremiah off in mid-sentence. "I don't care what you think. You were born to do this. I will give you what you need to get the job done."

His negative reaction to the call was quite predictable. How would you respond if God told you at age eighteen,

"I want you to grow up to be an abrasive prophet who will go up to the palace and tell the king that he's a fool and that his kingdom will be destroyed?" That's just not a leadership position that most eighteen year olds aspire to obtain. Actually, that's not a leadership position that any of us would want.

But, that was the job Jeremiah was given. He would be the "weatherman" in the middle of the storm. He would predict destruction when all the other weathermen were predicting a different storm track, one that would take the danger away from the homeland.

In one sense, you could say that Jeremiah was just born at the wrong time. His life spanned one of the most troublesome periods in Hebrew history leading up to the fall of Jerusalem in 587 BC. Everything that could go wrong did go wrong.

When you read the book of Jeremiah, you can hear the anguish of this reluctant prophet. He lived through crushing storms of hostility, self-doubt and what we might even call depression. His body was wracked by fatigue.

The prophet was forced to ask and answer the question that many of us face today. What happens when everything you believe in and live by is smashed to bits by circumstances? What happens when you find yourself in the path of destruction?

This is never what any of us want. When the storm approaches we prefer to believe that it will hit someone else. But, sometimes the storm comes our way.

We can become bitter about the storm, asking why God let this happen to us. But, we can use the storm as an opportunity to hear the call of God more clearly. That's what Jeremiah eventually ended up doing.

The catastrophe was an opportunity for Jeremiah and his people to reform their lives and rethink their priorities. The most powerful theology of the Old Testament comes from this troubled period of history because it is often in the destructive storm that God's people are enabled to conform to who God actually is as opposed to how they had imagined Him to be.

## PICKING UP THE PIECES

As I wrote this sermon, I noticed a car racing around our neighborhood. He was picking up a 4 by 4 here and a few sticks of wood there from the piles of ruined fences that litter my neighborhood.

I said "hello", with the underlying message being, "Exactly what are doing?" The fellow said rather sheepishly, "I couldn't find what I needed at Home Depot so I am trying to make repairs with what I can find."

For me that is a symbolic picture of what we must do when the storms of life destroy all we know. We must take what we have and build something new. We must pick up the broken remains of the storm and go on. It won't be the same as what we have lost, but it could be something even better than what we lost.

In the case of faith, I think this is almost always true.

A professor of preaching once told me, "If your sermon won't 'preach' in a nursing home, then it's no good." If you think about it, that's an awfully high standard. The residents of a nursing home have often lost everything. What can the preacher say that can bring a word of hope in a setting like that?

The preacher can say that God is with us in the storm. God cares about us and God gives us a job to do, no matter how young or old or weak we may be.

A lady in her 100s once commented to a visitor, "I don't know why I am allowed to live so long. I am here in this nursing home and not worth anything to any one."

Her visitor noticed her Bible and a devotional book that she had received from her pastor, and replied,

"You talk about how many of the workers here do not have faith. Maybe that is why you are here, that they can see your faith as you read your devotionals and have hope when all seems lost. Maybe God wants you to face death with confidence as a witness to those around you."

The lady said, "Oh, maybe so." The visitor could see that she was greatly cheered by this thought and she never spoke of her despair again. She had a call from God which gave her hope and meaning in the most difficult of circumstances.

#### I AM ONLY

Did you notice the excuse that Jeremiah made when God called him? Jeremiah said, "I am only" ... and in his case he said, "a boy."

I would suggest to you that there are some things that are more dangerous than the storm. And the most dangerous are those three words, "I am only." I am only a girl. I am only a child. I am only an old woman. I am only ... You fill in the blank. You, more than any one else, know how you put yourself down and think that your life is not worth living.

But, God doesn't want to hear that from us. As God told Jeremiah long ago, God tells us today, "Don't tell me 'I am only ...' any more." We are whom God wants us to be. Indeed, even our weakness can be used by God to further the kingdom. More than that, our weakness is a part of God's plan.

I am reminded once again of what Paul told the Christians at Corinth,

[26] Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. [27] But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; 1 Corinthians 1:26-27 (NRSV)

Have any of you felt weak and foolish this past week? I have. When you've got fifty hours worth of work to do and only twenty four hours in the day, something has got to give. Usually it is our sanity! Like Jeremiah we shout, "Lord, I'm only human. How can I do all this?"

And God tells us, "Trust me. You can't do it on your own. But, I will give you what you need. I will always have a job for you to do. I will deliver you."

#### HELP IS ON THE WAY

This past week God has once again shown me the truth of this passage in a very personal way.

Several months ago I bought a chain saw. I thought it to be an extravagant purchase at the time. I told the clerk, "I need the most inexpensive model you have. I just want something for some light work around the home." And so this past week I stood in the parking

lot of our church with a few other hardy church members and fired up my lightweight chain saw.

It was apparent that what we had wasn't enough to get the job done. In fact, one lady who uses our parking lot saw us as we began our work. She called me up and said that she and her husband would be willing to come help us clean up this Saturday. She said she felt sorry for us.

I was able to tell her, "Thank you very much, but help is on the way. God has provided what we need." This past Friday young and old alike gathered at the church to do what we could to remove the debris. One member even had a tractor with a blade that could push everything to the curb.

The job is not finished. There are still trees leaning precariously toward our church and toward our neighbors. I am sure that the next few months will be extra busy for our building and grounds committee as they seek to get everything back to normal.

But, I am confident that God will give us what we need, not only to get our church back into shape but also what we need to proclaim his word of peace and hope in a turbulent and anxious world.

#### GOD'S STRANGE CALL

The call of God seems strange to us.

God calls the weak to bring a message of power. He called the very young like Jeremiah and the very old like Abraham and Sarah.

He called a carpenter from Nazareth as well. This teacher seemed like a person without power, and yet he was able to still the storm. He died on a cross, abandoned by his disciples and most everyone else. As the storm raged around the cross of Calvary, I am sure many gave up hope.

But, we know the rest of the story.

In the end, it is the grace of God which triumphs and not the storm.

Remember that, and bring that word of hope to those who struggle.

Amen.

[FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH](#)