

July 28, 2019  
The Seventh Sunday after Pentecost—Proper 12  
and Holy Baptism of Amelia Ann Mellor  
The Rev. Keri T. Aubert  
St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, CT

Hosea 1:2-10  
Psalm 85  
Colossians 2:6-15, (16-19)  
Luke 11:1-13

The author Zora Neale Hurston, in her masterpiece 1937 novel, describes the arrival of a hurricane in a poor black community in Florida. God is on their minds. As she writes: “The wind came back with triple fury, and put out the light for the last time. They sat in company with the others in other shanties, their eyes straining against crude walls and their souls asking if He meant to measure their puny might against His. They seemed to be staring at the dark, but their eyes were watching God.”<sup>1</sup>

Two weekends ago, my family was supposed to travel to Baton Rouge. Due to the forecast hurricane, we ended up staying home, where I watched the proceedings on television.

My Louisiana childhood was punctuated by occasional hurricanes. For kids like me, it was exciting. The Weather Channel hadn't yet been created, but the local television stations did a good job of keeping people informed. They gave away hurricane tracking charts at the beginning of every hurricane season, and when a big storm was coming, I would dutifully plot the coordinates of its eye.

Now, every time there is a major hurricane, and perhaps because of Hurston's novel, I imagine what it would have been like to live before the era of weather forecasting. There would have been no way to anticipate whether a storm was likely to last five minutes or five days, or whether it might rain one-tenth of an inch or ten inches.

Armed with the latest science, today's meteorologists can predict with great accuracy a hurricane's arrival time, location, and severity. However, they *still* miss the mark of perfection. The storm that hit Louisiana two weeks ago turned out to be much weaker than predicted. That won't always be the case. Sooner or later, forecast or not, the big one *will* hit. When it does, those enveloped by storm clouds and sitting in darkness will be left with the same essential questions that people have always been asking: *Why now? Why here? Why us? Why me? Just, Why?*

One can appreciate what science offers—and also recognize that science always falls short. The hapless and helpless victim of sudden and inexplicable bad fortune seeks an explanation. Such seeking led ancient Greeks and Romans to venerate a pantheon of greater and lesser gods and goddesses. These divine beings played complex games of power and intrigue, often taking perverse delight in deploying random human pawns whose welfare was mostly irrelevant.

Against this chaotic polytheism, the first-century Judaism into which Jesus was born would have stood in stark contrast. The one Hebrew God that Jesus worshipped is our God, too. This God created all and called it good. This God desires relationship with the created order, especially creation's humans. This God insists that, for humans, right relationship with God requires right relationship with one another. Christians understand this God's coming as Jesus to be the ultimate expression of God's desire for loving relationship with us and among us.

The Gospels describe Jesus attending to his relationship with God through prayer. In today's reading from Luke, a disciple says, "Lord, teach *us* to pray..." Jesus provides an answer in three parts. He offers not only the words to say, but also reassurance that saying them is worth the bother. As people of faith, we affirm science *and* we pray; we affirm science *and* we baptize.

In just a few minutes we will baptize baby Amelia, making her the newest member of the body of Christ. Every baptism provides an opportunity to remember our own, and to consider its meaning and significance.

Like other Protestants, Episcopalians recognize two sacraments: Holy Communion and Holy Baptism. *The Book of Common Prayer* says this: "The sacraments are outward and visible signs of inward and spiritual grace, given by Christ as sure and certain means by which we receive that grace."<sup>2</sup> The principal sign of Holy Baptism is water. But there's a second sign: oil. At the chrismation, the priest says this: "You are sealed by the Holy Spirit in Baptism, and marked as Christ's own forever."<sup>3</sup>

Those are powerful words. They got me thinking about the word *identity*. Identity is sometimes claimed and sometimes assigned, generally through categories such as nationality, race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, or ability. It seems to me that, for us, through baptism, our primary identity is that of *Christian*. Our primary identity is that of Christian, whether or not we recognize or acknowledge it.

In Luke, the first thing Jesus tells the disciples to pray is, "hallowed be your name." To *hallow* something means to make it holy or to set it aside for holy use. By praying "hallowed be your name," we actually do two things: we hallow God, and we ask God to hallow Godself. Christians profess that God made humans in God's image, and that God became incarnate as the human Jesus. Therefore every person carries the spark of the divine; therefore all flesh has been made holy. One might say, then, that every human is hallowed: *we* have been made holy and set aside for holy use. It makes me wonder whether God is responding, "Hallowed be *your* name." Perhaps God is hallowing us, and asking us to hallow ourselves.

In Luke, Jesus also tells his disciples to pray, "Your kingdom come." Christians say that God's kingdom is already here but has not yet been fully realized. This "in-between," like other "in-betweens," is an uncomfortable place to be. It sometimes feels like stasis. Yes, as Jesus says later, the good parent gives to their child fish and egg, not snake and scorpion; still, the world is filled with hungry children whose parents pray daily for relief. Read carefully, and you will see that God's answer to our prayer is not necessarily what we ask for; it's the gift of the Holy Spirit. One of the ways we experience the Holy Spirit is through the gift of grace given at baptism.

And so it is that God has brought you into a world, not just of suffering, but also of joy. As the letter to the Colossians puts it, "when you were buried with him in baptism, you were also raised with him through faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead."<sup>4</sup>

Bad things happen even to good people. Sooner or later, whether or not we get a chance to plot its coordinates, a hurricane *will* come for us. When it does, we will find ourselves enveloped by storm clouds and sitting in darkness. We may even wonder, *Why?*

I don't have an answer. But I will say this: bad circumstances are not the results of divine random meddling, or even of divine reward and punishment. In the worst of circumstances—maybe especially then—God is with you. After all, God is love. God created you, hallowed and hallowing, for a relationship of mutual delight. Living as the kingdom comes, walk the way of Christ, and you will see the evidence of God's love; do the deeds of Christ, and you will manifest that love for others.

#### **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937).

<sup>2</sup> *The Book of Common Prayer*, 857.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 308.

<sup>4</sup> Colossians 2:12, NRSV.