

Road Trip

Whatever images might have arisen from what I just read to you, I'm guessing that the images in your head right now come from Southeast Texas and Southwest Louisiana. You know the images I mean – Houston's freeway system submerged, folks clinging to rooftops, children passed from their parents' arms into the waiting arms of first responders. It's hard to look at those images without feeling heartache for the millions of people who have lost their homes, their property, and their spiritual bearings.

As the waters recede, there will be many opportunities for us to offer help to those neighbors on the other end of Interstate 10. Just now, we can give money to organizations we trust. I put Presbyterian Disaster Assistance high on that list. If you are so moved, your worship bulletin provides information on how to share in that ministry.

As was the case with Hurricane Katrina and other storms, there will also be opportunities to contribute physical labor. Those of us who are able to do that kind of work will surely get the chance to go west and help folks muck out their homes.

Given those images on our T.V. screens, it's easy to forget where we left off last Sunday. We were at Caesarea Philippi, remember? Simon had just blurted out his famous confession of faith: **"You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God,"** and Jesus was telling him that this newfound faith was not of his doing, but of God's. **"Blessed are you . . . Jesus says, "for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but by Father in heaven."** Jesus then gives Simon a new name: *Petros* - Peter – which means "rock." **"And on this rock,"** Jesus promises, **"I will build my church."**

There is a connection between those images on our T.V.'s and this scene from Matthew's Gospel. It's not a direct connection. It doesn't run straight down Interstate 10 to Houston. Instead, it runs through Jerusalem, up a hill called Calvary, to what at first sight appears to be a dead end shaped like a cross.

Let's travel that road together for a few minutes, and see where it takes us.

As Jesus sets out on this road, he immediately runs into a roadblock – namely Simon Peter.

“From that time on,” writes Matthew, **“Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.”**

And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, “God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.”

Then Jesus, who has just changed Simon’s name to “Peter,” gives him another, less complementary name, **“Get behind me, *Satan!* You are a stumbling block to me, for you are setting your mind not on divine things, but on human things.”**

The way Matthew tells it, Jesus *must* go to Jerusalem. Theologians call this “must,” the must of “divine necessity.” Jesus *must* deliver the message God has given him to the power elite in Jerusalem – the elders, the chief priests, the scribes – even to Pontius Pilate, the Roman Governor. And when that message of love and justice sinks in, there will be hell to pay.

Jesus knows this full well, and still he sets out on that road. What’s more, he tells Peter, “If you want to be my disciple, step aside, get behind, and follow.” The same goes for anyone who wants to be a disciple of Jesus: **Deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow me.**

What, do you suppose, Jesus means by that? *Deny yourself. Take up your cross. Follow.*

For Peter, it means that he will have to reassess his idea of what a Messiah is. A Messiah is not someone who plucks us out of the world of suffering, injustice, and cruelty, but rather someone who leads us more deeply into that world – the world which God loves. The Messiah takes us to Jerusalem where God’s kingdom clashes with a human kingdom made up of religious and political authorities intent on preserving their own perks and maintaining the status quo. In Jerusalem, Jesus will confront both the High Priest and the Roman Governor, who will conspire to pin him to a cross.

Peter can't know all of that at this point in Matthew's Gospel. But he knows enough to realize that he doesn't want Jesus to go down that road, and he certainly doesn't want to follow Jesus down that road. That road leads to a cross. That road leads to suffering.

Who could blame Peter for wanting Jesus to take some alternative route to Messiahship? I certainly don't blame him. When it comes to taking up a cross of my own and following Jesus to Jerusalem, I'd rather not. In other words, my name is Satan, too.

How about you?

Whatever else the cross tells us, it tells us that, in Christ, God has chosen to suffer with humanity. Jesus is God's Messiah not *despite* the cross, but *because* of it. Through the mystery of the cross comes the miracle of resurrection. No cross means no Easter, and no resurrection hope.

Jesus even tells us that, if we want to follow him, we must be willing to bear a cross of our own.

I am the first to say that I'm not sure exactly what Jesus means when he tells me to take up my cross. But I think it must have something to do with sharing the suffering of others. Being only human ourselves, we cannot take another's pain away, but by sharing at least a little of their burden, we make their burden that much lighter.

To suffer along with another is not easy. It can be, quite literally, excruciating. But that is what Jesus did for us and expects us to do for others.

The road that leads to Jerusalem doesn't end at the cross. It leads on to the empty tomb. Then, most amazing of all, it leads back to Galilee – back home, where the risen Christ now walks beside us, sharing our burden. Or, if necessary, wades through the floodwaters with us. You could say that the road from Caesarea Philippi leads through Jerusalem, up to Calvary, through a borrowed tomb, and right back to Houston.

Many things sank to the bottom in Hurricane Harvey's floodwaters. One of them is the so-called "prosperity gospel" promulgated by millionaire preachers such as Joel Osteen, the pastor of the Lakewood Church in Houston.

Pastor Osteen's church received a great deal of criticism for failing to open its doors as a refuge for flood victims. Perhaps that failure was due to a breakdown in communication. I'd like to think so.

More important, however, is how the flood waters exposed the flimsiness of the prosperity gospel itself.

According to prosperity preachers, "Everything happens for a reason," and "everyone can be prosperous," if only they have faith. If you have faith," Mr. Osteen preaches, "God will bless you with health, wealth, and good fortune."

Then along comes Harvey, whose destruction knows no reason, who floods the homes of the righteous along with the homes of the unrighteous. No one is spared – except perhaps those who live in six-million dollar mansions perched on high ground.

The point is this: a cross-less Christianity might buoy you up in good times, but it sinks like a stone in bad times. Prosperity theology – so far as it is theology at all -- has no way to deal with the kind of indiscriminate suffering we see in those images from Houston. It has no songs of lament – only upbeat ditties and cheerful choruses. It's "Christianity light," but it doesn't float, does it?

In contrast, the faith that insists we go with Jesus to Jerusalem offers no simple explanation for *why* we suffer, but it will not leave us in the lurch *when* we suffer. The Christ who died on the cross is the Christ who rose on the third day – the Christ of the empty cross. This Christ is back with us in Galilee. In Tallahassee. In Houston.

Jesus could have taken a different route, but he didn't. Instead he is Emmanuel, God with us. No matter how deep the water gets, that's Good News.