

**“O THAT WE MAY SEE SOME GOOD!”  
(New Orleans After Katrina)**

**Based on Psalm 4 and Luke 24: 36b-49**

**April 30, 2006**

**Third Sunday of Easter**

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**at Townsend Congregational Church, UCC**

Before I begin I want to share a responsive cheer that my sister church, the Church of the Good Shepherd in Metairie, LA uses at all of their services and at any other time that seems appropriate. (Actually with all of the members from TCC who have been there, maybe it should be *our* sister church).

One: God is good,

**All: all the time.**

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**All: God is good**

**All: Amen**

Eight months ago this weekend, Hurricane Katrina blasted through New Orleans and the Gulf coast states leaving in her wake a swath of death and destruction the size of which our country had not seen before. The devastation in the New Orleans area was also grossly compounded by a series of human made disasters – “acts of humans” not “acts of God”.

Eight months later, hundreds of thousands of people are still unable to inhabit their homes. Some of the homes are completely destroyed, others are severely damaged and any house that got flooded is covered with toxic mold. Personal belongings are gone or are unsalvageable. People’s jobs are gone. Their neighborhoods are empty. Many of their churches and schools are closed, some never to reopen. And in some areas all semblances of normalcy have completely disappeared. After eight months, electricity, water, and sewer services still have not been restored to some areas of the city, and so traffic lights don’t work and porta-potties are set out on each city block. Mountains of rubble continue to line the streets. Many of the trees are broken and the famous great southern oaks are gone, their carcasses having now been reduced to wood chips. Acres and acres of precious wetlands have disappeared leaving coastal areas more vulnerable than ever. And as for the people, they have no idea what lies ahead for them. They are fearful and they are full of doubt. Some feel totally helpless and lost with no sense of direction. For some there is only hopelessness and despair. They have lost everything including their will to live.

Let us take a moment to pray:

Gracious God, author of the wonderful words of life, may we be open to your presence as we hear these words and discern your movement in our world and lives. We pray this in the name of Jesus, who was and is the Word made flesh. Amen.

I wonder how all of us would have reacted if we had lost so much. Perhaps some of you here have already experienced some sort of unexpected loss. Maybe it was a beloved family member or a close friend, or a special relationship you had. Maybe it was the job you had for half a lifetime. Or maybe it was your physical or mental health. How did you feel? Did you feel lost and hopeless? Were you confused? Did you have doubts and fears about what would happen to you next? What would your future be like?

Jesus' disciples were in a similar predicament. They were not prepared for Jesus to die. They had left their jobs, families, and all of their possessions behind, in order to follow Jesus. They probably thought that he would always be there for them. Jesus would lead them to new places and teach them new things. All the disciples had to do was to follow his lead. But, when Jesus died, their hopes and dreams and futures died too.

Our human spirits depend on hope. We have the need to know that there can be healing beyond the pain of the present, that there is something beyond the tears and darkness of a broken world, and that there is the possibility of a future beyond the endings of today. It is our belief and acceptance of Jesus' resurrection that assures us of that hope.

The disciples had been too discouraged, too full of fear and doubt, to have enough faith to believe that Jesus had been resurrected, so.... It was the resurrected Jesus who came to them. He talked with them, ate with them and let them touch him just to prove that his resurrection was real. Jesus then opened their eyes to a new reality that brought hope and new possibilities.

Today, it is just as possible for us to encounter the risen Christ as it was for those disciples two thousand years ago. Two weeks ago, Pastor Mark mentioned how some of the people in this congregation had encountered Jesus. I am one of them, and like the disciples, my faith was at a low to almost nonexistent state at the time. But, Jesus came to me and changed my life. God comes to us in Jesus, in surprising ways and when we least expect it.

Hopelessness though, is probably the greatest barrier to God, and it is up to us as modern day disciples of Christ to let hopeless people know that Jesus is seeking that encounter, and that hope is alive.

All of the members of our mission group, were called as modern day disciples to bring the hope and love of Christ to New Orleans. Our presence as the Body of Christ was to be the most important thing we could bring, as we made ourselves available to listen to the stories of those devastated people.

On our first full day there, I had the opportunity to go to a local elementary school and read books to the children and share with them a little bit about myself and Massachusetts. One of the students at the school had previously attended school in Shrewsbury, MA, so our group delivered boxes of books from Shrewsbury as a gift to his new school. While the boy's class was being assembled in front of the school for a multitude of pictures, I spotted the school custodian all alone leaning against the wall, waiting for the time to move the boxes of books inside. I was curious as to know how he fared during hurricane Katrina, so I went over to him and started up a conversation.

His name is Johnnie, Johnnie Chatman, and he told me that his house had not been affected by the flooding. He had a huge tree fall on his house, destroying the roof. The rain then poured in, and ruined everything inside. Johnnie didn't have any homeowner's insurance because it was too expensive and he couldn't afford it, and he doesn't have enough money to repair the roof either. He now lives in a small FEMA trailer with his two daughters and two grandchildren, and he is the only one in the family who is working. He can barely make ends meet with his small salary, and even if he was able to cut back on any expenses, it wouldn't be enough to pay for any repairs. Johnnie told me that he has no idea as to how he can possibly find enough money to fix the roof of his house, never mind fixing the interior of the house. He just couldn't see any way to make it happen. On top of it, he can only use the FEMA trailer for eighteen months because the government doesn't want people living in them permanently. Johnnie has no hope for ever finding the money to fix his house before he loses the FEMA trailer. He has no idea what he will do or where he will go, if and when he loses the trailer. He seemed so desperately lost and felt so hopeless. I asked him if he belonged to a church, and he said no, but that he did attend a local church. I asked if maybe they would be able to help him, and he explained that the church did not have much money, besides, there were others at the church who needed the money more than he did. Johnnie was so desperate and he felt so utterly alone and hopeless. The only thing that I could offer to him at the time, was prayer.

I brought his story back to our group and shared it at one of our meetings and we talked about how we could help him. Later in the week I had the opportunity to drive other people to the school to read, and I brought a bunch of gift certificates for Johnnie. He was so grateful. He said it was such a blessing. The Church of the Good Shepherd will be working with him now and assisting him as necessary. Johnnie now has some hope.

We brought hope to the people of New Orleans in other ways too. We were new visitors who had the capacity to share some of their burdens. Wherever we went, whether it was a restaurant, a building supply store, a school, or just standing on the sidewalk in hazmat suits, people thanked us for coming down to help. They continuously told us “You have no idea of how much it means to us for you to be here.” We shared tears, and hugs, and prayers.

We did demolition work in two houses. Wearing Tyvek suits, goggles, and face masks in 90 degree weather, we shoveled rubble and damaged personal items from the houses and placed it at the curb. These were pieces of real people’s lives, artifacts from the comfortable homes of loving families. We never had the chance to meet these families in person, but it was okay. Jesus had called us to do this work for our fellow brothers and sisters in need, and so we did this knowing that we were making a positive difference in their lives.

With the assistance of other work crews in the area, we did substantial rebuilding in the Church of The Good Shepherd so that soon their sanctuary can become a special place of healing, wholeness, and hope to those people who have been living with the widespread devastation every day for the past eight months.

After Jesus appeared before the disciples, he had to open their minds to understand how his resurrection fit with the Scriptures, and to help them accept what their new roles were to be. Then he instructed them to wait, “until they had been clothed with power from on high.”

I wonder how many of us are waiting like that. Are you running around being pulled in many different directions? Are you listening to what God really wants? We run the risk of expending a lot of energy and activity when we forget whose mission we are on. We cannot do what God has called us to do without God’s help. The power from on high, is a gift of God, that is given in his own time and in his own way.

New Orleans is waiting. New Orleans is also being pulled in many different directions. There is the risk that a lot of energy and activity may be expended in wasteful ways unless the decision makers can have their minds opened to the will of God.

While most of New Orleans waits, a lot of the good and a lot of the bad has been exposed, but there has been much more of the good floating to the top. Before Katrina, New Orleans was a segregated city that suffered from classism, racism, political corruption, and grinding poverty. It is a city where even the churches were segregated. The UCC has been trying to reduce segregation in its churches since 1957 with mediocre results. But since Katrina, there have been some very positive and successful results. The partnership between the Church of the Good Shepherd and the Beecher

Church is one such example where the members of both churches are worshipping together and sharing resources and fellowship.

The schools are becoming integrated too. Before Katrina, I had heard reports that poor, primarily African American schools in the lower ninth ward were in such bad condition, that the children had to use the rest rooms at a fast food restaurant across the street. Now as the sturdier schools in the city reopen, they are integrated. The children accept and play with each other as equals. The parents also seem to be pleased with the rich diversity of the realigned schools.

The topic of ecological restoration has also come to the forefront. Before Katrina there was a proposed plan to restore valuable coastal wetlands at a seemingly staggering cost of \$14 billion. But every mile of restored wetland could have reduced the storm surge by 10 feet. Now, after Katrina, the cost to restore the city is over \$100 billion. Perhaps now the restoration projects may be seen as cost effective necessities.

Another facet of inequality that has been exposed, is with the tax revenues from oil and gas production. In every other oil and gas producing state in the country, the state receives 50% of those tax revenues. Louisiana receives none. If Louisiana was treated like every other state in this respect, it would not need any additional help from the government.

Maybe New Orleans has waited long enough, maybe New Orleans is ready to be clothed with the power from on high. The clean up is going painfully slow in New Orleans, but the churches are there doing what the government has not been able to do yet. Each missionary who comes to New Orleans becomes the Christ incarnate through their hands and voices. We are bringing the stories back home and keeping the hope alive that New Orleans will not be forgotten. To the people of New Orleans, we are people of hope, people of the resurrection.

Let us pray:

Grant us, Lord God, a vision of our land as your love would make it:

a land where the weak are protected, and none go hungry or poor;

a land where the benefits of civilized life are shared, and everyone can enjoy them;

a land where different races and cultures live in tolerance and mutual respect;

a land where peace is built with justice, and justice is guided by love.

And give us the inspiration and courage to build it, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.