

## Faith and Nature and the Nature of Faith

Romans 1:16-17, 3:22-28; Matthew 7:21-29

*Great Creator God, you spin the whirling planets and reveal your mighty arm in the surging seas and roaring winds. Blow your Holy Spirit into our hearts that we may tremble before you, raise our arms to be lifted by your grace, and set our feet upon the rock to serve you in Jesus name. Amen.*

There have been some spectacular storms lately. Not just the ones that we have seen in Myanmar, but also the 1200 tornadoes that have torn across the country this year, killing at least 110 people. I lay in my bed on Friday night, listening to the great tall trees of Sylvan Lake bowing and bending and whipping about in the roaring wind and the lashing rain. The lightning flashed so brightly, it lit up the room and the thunder that followed it literally shook the house. I was excited by the power and drama of it all, but I also could see in my mind's eye the photos I'd seen on the news of the flattened neighborhoods—houses smashed into smithereens, cars thrown about like tinker toys. And as I lay there pondering how I might feel if my house were pancaked by the enormous tree that grows behind it, I wondered about these words of Jesus that close the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew Chapter 7:

*"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven. On that day, many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do deeds of power in your name?' Then I will declare to them, I never knew you. Go away from me, you evildoers.*

*Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock. And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain fell, and the flood came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell—and great was its fall!" Now when Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes.*

Now I do not stand here to offer you explanations for why nature can seem to turn tragically against us. Why do these things happen? Insurance companies tromped all over the Gulf Coast for years to determine whether flood or wind caused the damages from Katrina,

and some folks are still unable to rebuild their homes because no one has been able to decide. And although Sharon Stone may have determined that the earthquake was caused by China's injustices against Tibet, it seems that much of the death toll was due to shoddy—if not willfully inadequate—construction standards. But whether or not we can fully explain and understand why any of these things happen, when we are confronted by the power and grandeur of the cosmos, we discover ourselves tiny, fragile, vulnerable. And, when we are reminded of our powerlessness, perhaps we are more willing to fall to our knees in recognition that we cannot save ourselves.

In another part of the lection today—Genesis 6—we can read of another storm when the heavens opened and the seas rose and the rivers roared—and a remnant of people and animals is saved by a God whose heart had been broken over his wayward creation. Why was Noah saved and not his neighbor? We don't know. All we know is that Noah did as God commanded him and rode out the waves with his wife and sons and dogs and cats and elephants. Noah knew he could not save himself.

We're all in the boat with Noah. For, as Paul wrote to the Romans, all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and we are made right with God by God's grace as a gift, that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith. Our relationship with God—being made right because of Jesus' atoning sacrifice on the cross, is not something we can merit. Contrary to the old investment commercials, we cannot "earn it." We cannot save ourselves—none of us, no not one—not you, not the choir, not the Stephen Ministers, not the deacons or elders or pastors—because our righteousness has nothing to do with it. This is called radical grace. God calls Noah into the ark, God sends Jesus to die for our sins. As Paul summarizes, there is no room for boasting; a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law.

And Paul of all people should know. He was a Pharisee of Pharisees—a man determined to guard the sanctity and observance of the Jewish law. Although he had studied his religion zealously—attended seminary and devoured all the Bible Studies he could—these things failed to free his heart. In fact, they served to entrap him in his own sense of power and self-righteousness, so that he felt justified to persecute Christians, hunt them down and kill them.

He did this most sincerely—as have religious people through all the ages—in the name of God. He fell into the trap that awaits all of us: when Paul thought he was most right, he was most wrong.

We really have a hard time getting this. Back in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century, there lived a passionate, impetuous, demanding, sensitive and pessimistic Roman Catholic monk named Martin Luther, who had never been able to find inner peace. He suffered from a persistent sense of guilt and so drove himself to endless prayers, self-flagellation, deprivation of his body in order to achieve righteousness. He literally tortured himself in his desire to be good and to merit God's love, until his father confessor advised him to read Romans. For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus ... effective through faith. Luther discovered the bombshell truth that God had forgiven his sins, not because of Luther's efforts in Germany, but because of Christ's work on Calvary. Luther made the same discovery that Paul did 1500 years earlier, and that Jesus talked about before that.

Well, now just wait a minute! Don't we have to do something? Jesus says we have to do the will of God the Father. It says right here in Matthew:

*Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven.*

True enough, but keep reading:

*On that day, many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do deeds of power in your name?'*

Jesus is describing the religious folks—the ones who call Jesus Lord, and preach and teach and do great deeds in Jesus' name. Like Paul did. Like Luther. We make the stunning discovery that it is possible to do good works in the name of the Father and still fail to do the will of the Father. *Then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you. Go away from me, you evildoers.'*

It's disturbing isn't it? It's disturbing because it places our salvation on God's terms, not on ours. It's disturbing because it forces us to examine ourselves and recognize that judgment begins—not in the remote corners of the world where the gospel has not been heard—but here, in the church, with the people of God. And it's disturbing because it makes clear that what the Lord requires of us are not good works, or right appearances, but transformed hearts and lives.

The whole of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus has been describing what it means to live a transformed life... There are instructions on prayer, marriage, friendship—even on how to treat your enemies. There's explanation of what the law really requires, and how to trust God implicitly. Turns out to be a follower of Jesus means that what flows out of us—what we do with our days, how we serve with our hands—comes not out of a sense of obligation or fear or striving for merit, but out of an inner life of faith, and hope, and joy, and most of all, love. It seems to me that the Sermon the Mount is a blueprint for our lives, modeled on what the kingdom of God looks like, and built to withstand any of the storms of life.

*"Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock. And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain fell, and the flood came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell—and great was its fall!"*

Two men who built houses. The two houses look for all the world the same from the outside, just as most of us look the same from the outside, just as most churches look the same from the outside. When the rains fell and the floods came, the winds blew and beat upon them. One stood tall against the storm. One fell flat in the face of nature's fury.

How did the wise man differ from the foolish man? Did he work harder? No. Did he use better materials? Probably not. Did the storms of life pass him by? Emphatically, no. The only difference was the foundation on which they chose to build. One built on the shifting sands and quaking foundations of his own merit, and the other on the rock of ages that shall not be shaken ... no matter what thunder rumbles, or rains beat down, or floodwaters rise up, or winds blow.