

This week, as the devastation wreaked by Hurricane Harvey became increasingly heart-breaking, perhaps one of the worst aspects of the storm was the realization by so many that things are not going to be “normal” for a long time, if ever.

Perhaps that’s why our society likes television shows so much: within an hour, there can be terrible trauma, but by the time the last commercials play out, there is usually some sort of resolution to the drama, so that we can turn it off and forget about it if we want to. The kind of trauma offered up by storm Harvey is not like that at all. Even if those of us who were not in the storm refuse to read about the struggles and losses of others, we cannot totally turn our backs on their sufferings. One reason, having nothing to do with our sense of caring about others who are having a hard time, is the fact that our own gasoline prices have risen because of the storm. So we are affected, and our entire country is affected as we will need to determine how to pay for all the rebuilding and emergency housing and drinking water that are and will be so needed for a long time.

We who are followers of Jesus and citizens of this United States, need to respond with our dollars to help, as best as we are able. The Red Cross, even though it has been criticized some, does the “heavy lifting” to help people at first. UMCOR, who works with and through churches in the area, will be there helping for a long time. Our daughter suggested that we help out the Houston Humane Society as they try to deal with trapped and homeless animals. There are any number of channels trying to help and needing our help.

In addition, we need to watch and pray for our elected officials, especially in Washington, D.C., as they address the massive need for federal aid because of the storm. When Hurricane Sandy devastated so many in Connecticut, New York, and New Jersey a few years ago, some of those from Texas did not want to appropriate federal money to help the victims of that storm. Now those same senators NEED financial help. So will our senators try to treat them the same way they were treated? I hope not!

It’s so easy to want to strike back and get even. “You didn’t want to help us, so why should we help you?” And so the divide in our nation would deepen even more.

When the apostle Paul wrote his letter to the Roman Christians, he was dealing with people who were being mistreated and oppressed because of their belief that Jesus was the Messiah, God’s Son. Those who did not believe this were making life very hard for these Christians. They often lost their jobs, they were excluded from their synagogues, and sometimes they were killed, because of their faith.

But instead of simply telling the Christians to hold strong and know that God was with

them, Paul echoed Jesus as he set before them a difficult and, for them as much as for us today, absurd challenge: “Bless those who persecute you, bless and do not curse them....Do not repay anyone evil for evil...No, if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink... Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.” (Parts of Romans 12:14-21)

Imagine how this might possibly play out in our world today, and how absurd so many would regard it to be: First, when our Congress comes together, ALL might be of one mind to help the victims of Hurricane Harvey. No arguing. No wheeling and dealing: no saying, “Well, if we pass a bill to give you money, we have to include this other thing that *I* want, too. Only then will I vote to help.” None of that; only concern to provide fast and lasting help for those who need it! Absurd, right?

Another wild idea: North Korea scares us as it shows off its nuclear capabilities (another one this morning!) and its aggressive spirit. But its people are hungry, because of poor leadership in North Korea and the tight sanctions being placed upon it to try to force the nation into compliance. How absurd would it be if we decided to do *good* things to North Korea? Send food, lots of it. Offer trade. Try God’s advice to “overcome evil with good.” Absurd, but is such a thing LESS absurd than the negative paths we are on now, wielding threats and trying to bully the bully??

Long before Jesus was born, the Book of Exodus tells us, God spoke to Moses, having gotten Moses’ attention through a bush that was burning but not burning up. Remember, Moses had led a very un-normal life. When he was born, his family had been part of a large group of Jews living a good life in Egypt; four hundred years earlier, Joseph had welcomed his father, Jacob, and his eleven brothers and their families to Egypt so that they could settle there during a terrible famine. Well, the Jews had flourished over those 400 years, so much so that the Egyptians became threatened by them. So the Pharaoh declared that all Jewish male babies should be killed. That set the stage for Moses! His mother hid him after he was born, and then, desperate to save her baby boy from being slaughtered, put him in a basket in the river and sent him downstream. It just so happened that Pharaoh’s own daughter found the baby, ended up paying Moses’ own mother to nurse him (!), and raised him in the Pharaoh’s household! So he lived and was educated, but still got to be nurtured by his nursemaid mother. Not bad.

But one day the young man Moses saw an Egyptian mistreating a Jewish slave, and Moses ended up killing the Egyptian and hiding his body. Turned out somebody saw the act; when Moses found out, he ran away. He ended up in Midian, where he helped some folks and, as a result, was given work by Reuel, and then was given Reuel’s daughter, Zipporah, in marriage. So things must have started feeling calm for Moses, even “normal.”

“Normal” did not last very long. Today we heard that God gave Moses an absurdly challenging task: Go back to Egypt, and deliver my people - said God - out of slavery there. In the face of all the “But’s” Moses could come up with, excuses why this assignment did not fit his abilities, God gave Moses a promise that is actually good for ALL of us, “I will be with you.” You probably know the rest of the story, that God *was* with Moses, and that this absurd challenge indeed was given to the right man, even though Moses did not know this at first.

Challenges. Life and other people can certainly provide them for us. It’s so easy to take the world’s way out and strike back or try to settle a score in a negative way; our newspapers are filled with reports of this happening on all levels every day throughout the world. If we are really trying to be Christian, though, we must not forget that the One we follow, Jesus, finally embraced an absurd challenge – that of laying down his own life for the sake of lots of folks who were about to kill him, who denied knowing him, and today who pretty much ignore him except when they’re using his name to utter a curse. An absurd challenge, to overcome evil with good, hatred with love. But this is our challenge, TODAY, on every level, if we are serious about following Jesus.

Maybe somebody here in this sanctuary really gets on your nerves. Guess what? You can see that person as your absurd challenge – a chance to follow the way of Jesus. Or perhaps you are totally in a wad over politics these days – that’s a huge prayer-project! You get the gist...

We are people trying to follow Jesus in a society that has too often experienced his followers as folks who condemn others and/or gather together in fancy sanctuaries congratulating themselves on what good Christians they are. That’s not what Jesus asked us to do. “Love your enemies, pray for those who persecute you; give to the hungry, the poor, the abandoned, the powerless...” If our actions do not reflect what our Lord told us to do, we are not Christian. When our actions *do* reflect Jesus’ instructions, when we trust God enough to obey and pray, there’s no telling what will happen!

May each of us watch for burning bushes and tiny and large signals that love is needed in the face of hatred, that good is being called upon to overcome evil, even in the most “normal” times of our lives.

The beauty of this week has been the way folks have come together, rich and poor, black and white, legal and illegal residents, all in the same boat, all challenged way beyond “normal.” I pray that somehow there can be some lasting healing of us all from the witness of people bound together in the face of absurd and terrifying challenges.

We’re about to sing, “Trust and Obey”. We *can* trust and obey, because God is with us, in every challenge, decision, action and prayer along the way. Amen.