

Sermon 3 Pentecost Proper 4
June 1, 2008
St. John's Episcopal Church
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After the Storm

Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds beat and blew on that house, but it did not fall because it was founded on 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 floods 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.
Matthew 7:21-29

One thing is certain: when the floods come and the winds blow, there isn't much to do except ride out the storm. Only when the storm subsides can we take stock of the damage done and determine if the foundations upon which we had built our lives were strong enough to withstand the forces that beat so fiercely against them.

The rush to judgment in the aftermath of a storm is irresistible. We need to know—were we at fault, or not? Were we the wise ones who built our houses on rock or the foolish ones with houses built on sand? Did the rock we assumed to be strong fail us? Was it faulty rock? Were we one of the lucky ones with our sand-built houses still standing because the whims of fortune blew the worst destruction onto someone else? Is it, as the story of Noah implies, *God's* fault when disaster strikes?

The residents of Hugo, Minnesota had to ask: was it because their houses were poorly constructed that they didn't survive the storm? To which the mayor of Hugo replied: “It would have been hard for any house, no matter how sturdy, to withstand the force of an F-3 tornado.” It's comforting, in an odd sort of way, to recognize that some storms will overtake us no matter how well prepared we are. By way of contrast, think of parents whose children did not survive the earthquake in China because their school building was of substandard quality. “They have stolen our children,” the parents said of the government officials who allowed such schools to be used for children of poor families, while the officials' children attended a private school nearby that withstood the earthquake just fine.

“Everyone who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise person who built a house on rock. Everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like the foolish person who built a house on sand.” The problem is that we don't realize how weak our foundations weak until they are tested. We think they're fine, until the floods come and the wind blows. Then our vulnerabilities are revealed for what they are, and we are left to clear the wreckage of what has been destroyed and contemplate rebuilding our lives.

Peter Gomes, the chaplain at Harvard, is often called upon to give commencement speeches at this time of year, and he gives essentially the same speech everywhere he goes. Its title: *How Are You Going to Live after the Fall?* “Innocent pagans that most students are,” he writes, “they assume that I'm asking them what their plans are after September. But I'm not. I'm asking them what they are going to do after their first dreams fall from the sky. What are you going to do, I ask them, when you don't get the

job, when you don't get the girl or the boy, when you are brushed aside or hurt, when your children rise up to treat you the same way you treat your parents? What are you going to do?"

"The Good Life you so rightly seek," Gomes tells class after class of graduates, "must serve you in your most difficult, desperately hard times. It must help you to cope in your moments of doubt and despair. If what you live by does not serve you then, it is no good for you, even in the good times."¹

But in the aftermath of disaster we're all caught up short. It's a naked feeling, akin to shame. We're painfully aware that our foundations are not nearly as strong as we thought they were and our vulnerabilities lie exposed for the world to see.

Then what? What do we do then? For some, perhaps for all of us at least once in our lives, we fall apart. How long we remain in that place of devastation depends, to a large degree, on the extent of our loss. It also depends on what we have to work with inside ourselves, and how we open we are, in that moment of pain, to the grace of God. For if we are to continue on after the storm, we have no choice but to get up, take stock of what we've lost, grieve for as long as we need to, rail against God for as long a must, and then go about the task of rebuilding our lives on firmer foundations. It isn't easy work. But it is what people of faith do. It's what faith is *for*—those times, after the Fall, when the foundations we thought were sturdy collapse all around us, and by the grace of God, we begin again.

How we begin again is essential: What did we learn? Where were we vulnerable or naïve? What does a house built on rock look like? Where do we go for stability and strength, ballast and direction? A strong foundation is like good nutrition—you don't attain it all at once, but in countless little choices that make up a life.

The author Ann LaMott writes of her search for these things in an essay entitled, *Why I Make Sam Go to Church*, which is required reading for baptism preparation and Going Deeper classes at St. John's). "Sam is the only kid he knows who goes to church," LaMott writes of her son. "He rarely wants to. This is not exactly true: the truth is he never wants to go. What young boy would rather be in church on the weekends than hanging out with a friend?"

"You might think," she goes on, "that he was being made to sit through a six-hour Latin Mass. Or you might wonder why I make this strapping exuberant boy come with me most weekends, and if you were to ask me, this is what I would say. I want to give him what I have found in the world, which is to say a path and little light to see by. Most of the people I know who have what I want—which is to say, purpose, heart, balance, gratitude, joy—are people with a deep sense of spirituality. They are people in community, who pray and practice their faith. They are Buddhists, Jews, Christians—people banding together to work on themselves and for human rights. They follow a brighter light than the glimmer of their own candle... Our funky little church is filled with people who are working for peace and freedom, who are out there on the streets and inside praying; they are home writing letters and at the shelters with giant platters of food. .. When I was at the end of my rope, the people at my church tied a knot in it for me and helped me hold on..."²

¹ Peter Gomes, taken from a lecture given in the Twin Cities in 2005. See also his book, *The Good Life: Truths That Last in Times of Need* (HarperSanFrancisco, 2002).

² Ann LaMott, "Why I Make Sam Go to Church," in *Traveling Mercies*, 99-100.

That's what the foundations of faith look like—the daily practice of following a path by the little bit of light that comes our way; the commitment to work on ourselves and for the dignity of every human being; the promise to show up for life in community, to be there for one another, and for people we do not know, when someone's at the end of their rope or when storms shake us to the core. And should everything come crashing down—as someday everything might— as people of faith, we grieve, get angry, take stock . . . and then we begin again.

Now we all know that there are some storms no one can withstand. There are some things that will take us down. But we are far more resilient as a species than we let on sometimes. There are far more circumstances in which our *response* to what happens and our capacity to come back from the storm is as much a factor in determining our destiny than the severity of the storm itself. And God is on the side of resilience, our renewal as individuals and our evolution as a species. The Rev. Ward Bauman, director of the House of Prayer, says it this way: “Looking toward the future, there will either be a social breakdown or a human breakthrough. It's a human breakthrough that I'm invested in.” Surely God would say the same thing.

What does it look like to rebuild a life after the storms blow? It will always start small: the tiny steps that bring order out of chaos, that rebuild the foundations shaken or blown away, that remind us of all that matters most. Those tiny steps will strip away the trivial things that take up far too much time and space and reconnect us to our core values. They will guide us toward a life in which there is always enough for what we need and always something left to share. Eventually, those small steps take us to the place where our pain becomes a source of healing and desire to make the world a better place for others.

Earlier this week, the faith-based advocacy organization, Isaiah, to which St. John's belongs, held a public meeting entitled, “Co-Creating Healthy Communities and Racial Equity.” One of the principle organizers of that gathering was our own Michelle Dibblee, who serves as the chair of the Minneapolis/Richfield Caucus of Isaiah. In her opening remarks to the 250+ people gathered in a Minneapolis church on Thursday, Michele told her own story of foundations shaken and painstakingly rebuilt. Her story is so apropos to the themes of this sermon that I asked Michelle to tell part of it to you this morning, and she has graciously agreed.

Michelle Dibblee:

Six years ago, I was doing community work in a racially mixed part of Minneapolis. During the course of that work, I found myself in a roomful of people being called a racist. It happened in part because I was naive, in part because I just wasn't paying attention. I made some decisions that I am not proud of. I'm not proud of my response, either -- I ran away. I was supposed to leave my job in two weeks and move out of state, so I quit early and moved. I am not proud of that. What happened in that room -- the pain, the mistrust, the anger, most of which was directed at me -- ripped apart the world as I had known it. It was like I had been picked up, shaken, turned upside down and dumped all over the floor, and nothing I thought I understood was true anymore. So I went to those who love me to bind up my wounds, and then I left.

In 2004, I moved back to Minnesota and reconnected with St. John's and with Isaiah. A year ago, leaders in Isaiah began intentional efforts to create partnerships across racial lines. Part of that work involved some profound seeking that I and others have done about why those partnerships didn't already exist. And because of that work, and these relationships, and because of my own experience, I know that at the center of the concerns that were raised on Thursday night, about health, about education, and about community development, is the painful and ugly divide of racism.

I am here because I decided not to keep running. I could have -- it was really easy, in that moment. But I believe our communities need desperately to be healed and whole. And I discovered that I, too, want to be healed and whole. My desire is to help transform the world, to participate in healing what is broken. On Thursday night, we gathered to change the world, to make real a vision of abundance and hope for all. But I know that even as I seek to transform the world, I must be open to my own healing, and the transformation that flows from that healing. I regret the pain I caused others in that room. But in the end, I don't regret my own pain. It helped to lay a new foundation for my life, and for the kind of world that I really want to live in.

That's what life after the storm looks like. Just as bones grow stronger in the broken places, so we grow stronger where we have been tested and have failed. After the storm, God will give us the grace and courage to begin again, for our own soul's sake and for the work of healing and transformation in the world.