



LUTHERAN
CHURCH OF **HOPE**

By Pastor Merv Thompson

Pastor's Update

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"Grace, mercy and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord." I Timothy 1:2.

John writes in his Gospel, *"The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes."* Maybe he had some inkling of hurricanes to come, his words seem to describe Hurricane Katrina as we continue to hear the sounds and reverberations from the aftermath.

Katrina has brought about such intense emotions. Most of us were shocked and dismayed when we saw the physical damage caused by the wind and water surges, and the thousands of square miles reduced to rubble. Soon after the hurricane moved northward we began to see the horrifying sights of people abandoned in searing heat, surrounded by polluted water, and lacking almost all of the necessities of life.

Who can forget those images of people crying out for help and no help was forthcoming. All we could say to ourselves and those around us were the words, "This is not us. This is not America. We do not abandon people. We do not leave them without hope."

Every editorial writer has tried to wax eloquently about the storm and the resulting response or lack thereof, so I have little to add to that; but, one of the writers, David Brooks, made a cogent point that I think bears repeating, and expanding. He said that he believes Katrina will become a watershed experience in American history, that life in America will fundamentally change because of the hurricane. He is not quite sure about all of the changes, but he senses they are coming.

He gives some historical lessons to document his argument. In 1889 a tragic flood devastated Johnstown, Pennsylvania. Witnesses watched in horror as hundreds of people were trapped on a burning bridge, forced to choose between being burned to death or jumping to their death in the swollen river below.

Best selling author, David McCullough, in his book on that flood, writes how public fury soon was directed at the Pittsburgh elite whose club's fishing pond had been emptied into the town, exacerbating the flood. Building on resentment which had been growing toward robber barons and rich industrialists, it soon fueled a new progressive movement. For Christians it is also of interest that the social gospel

movement arose during this time.

1927 marked another landmark flood, this one also nearby to New Orleans, when the Mississippi River overflowed its banks. Even more tragically civic leaders intentionally flooded poor and middle class neighborhoods in order to ease water pressure on the rest of the city. Later these same leaders would renege on promises to compensate those whose homes had been destroyed. This tragedy caused a rising anger against the federal government and a demand to become involved in disaster relief. Ultimately this led to the New Deal and the election of Franklin Roosevelt.

Of course September 11, 2001 was another watershed event in American history. Nothing in the world has appeared quite the same since we witnessed the horror of airplanes hitting New York and Washington D.C. Two wars indirectly or directly have come from this tragedy, one in Afghanistan and the other in Iraq. A massive Department of Homeland Security was established to make sure Americans were kept safe and never suffer another such event. 9-11 was a defining moment for America. It changed us forever.

If Brooks is right, how will Hurricane Katrina change America? No one is entirely sure, but let me consider some possibilities.

*The problems which took place before, during and after the hurricane struck in the Gulf Coast are no doubt both structural and personal. It appears as if the systems put in place simply did not work, communication broke down, cooperation between various units of government was lacking, and everyone seemed to be just overwhelmed. So there was definitely a systems problem.

There was also a personnel problem. Many key positions in the federal government seemed to have been staffed by people with little competence or experience in such endeavors.

It is hard to say what will change in this area, given the harsh partisanship that affects the political arena today. It is clear that we need to look very closely at the systems which were put in place and make sure they can respond adequately to any kind of crisis. I would guess that the

people brought in to lead these systems will never again be chosen in quite the same way, but that competence and experience will count for much more than before. Maybe we will begin to focus on finding the best people to manage these huge bureaucratic systems in our country rather than relying on an "old-boy" network.

*I wonder if Americans will finally begin to confront the omnipresent issues of race and poverty. In an Update written just before the last presidential election, I asked the question, 'Where Are The Poor?' The point was not that the poor had disappeared, but unlike previous campaigns, neither candidate was talking about them. They were all but invisible.

At the same time, a report was issued in recent weeks which said that 'the numbers of people living in poverty in our country went up by over a million this past year', the fourth straight year of increases. Hardly a whisper came out of the press or the political culture about this alarming trend.

The images which flooded our senses in the aftermath of the hurricane completely changed the landscape. Politicians or the press could no longer control the message. Anyone watching could see that almost all of the people left behind in New Orleans were poor and black. America almost appeared as a third-world country, the tragedy visible for all to see of people trapped by water and poverty and hopelessness, absence the necessities of life such as safety, water, food, sanitary facilities, and dignity.

So many questions were raised that will no doubt confront us in the months and years to come. We are the richest nation in the history of the world. Why must such a large percentage of our citizens live in poverty? Why do we have such a high infant mortality rate. We are something like 17th in the world? Why does the government seem to create policies that benefit the affluent rather than the poor? Why cannot America provide decent housing, jobs, health care and dignity to all of its citizens? Why are the rich getting richer and the poor getting poorer? Why? Why? Why?

Perhaps New Orleans can be rebuilt in a way so that all of the poor are not forced into ghettos, but blended into the larger society. Perhaps a national strategy will emerge to end segregation and poverty. Perhaps a country which is supposedly majority Christian will take seriously the biblical teachings about wealth and poverty, *"whatever you do,"* says Jesus, *"whatever you do for the least of these my sisters and brothers, you do it for me."* Or we will look to Amos's words in the Old Testament,

5:24, *"Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream."*

*I wonder if we will begin to look more closely now at what we are doing to our fragile ecosystem in which we live. Genesis tells us that God created the earth and saw that it was very good, and then told us to take care of it. Debate swirls around whether these hurricanes are being caused by human desecration of the environment. But there can be little debate about the fact that we are pouring all sorts of pollutants into our water, air, and food and that it may be catching up with us. Maybe we need to pay less attention to profits and more attention to prophets.

*` Not surprisingly, one of the most underreported stories about Hurricane Katrina is the fact that thousands and thousands of congregations have stepped out to help the victims. A massive response from churches of all denominations and no denomination have provided shelter, food, water, prayer, love, volunteers, and hope to people in need. One of the reasons I was so encouraged that people were been transported to Houston is because there are so many dynamic and effective churches in that city. Now with Rita bearing down on the city, this compassion will be sorely tested.

Lutheran Church of Hope has responded magnificently as well. Close to \$100,000 has been collected through Hope for Lutheran Disaster Relief, and no doubt our members have given a great deal elsewhere through groups like the Red Cross and the Salvation Army. We have already sent two huge trucks containing supplies to the families and over 100 families have offered to house victims. Volunteers have trained with the Red Cross and are ready to travel. We are offering to partner with a congregation in New Orleans and help them rebuild.

Perhaps these storms will help the church in America realize that it has enormous resources and opportunity to unite to help those in need and to set a different tone in the nation. We can bring not only food and water, but also the bread of life and the living water. For so long the church has been marginalized by a secular culture, but we have the only truly national network which, under the lordship of Jesus Christ, is ready and willing to assist those in need.

God doesn't send hurricanes to change us, but in the midst of storms God can work with us to transform the world. Let's hope that something fundamental changes in America as a result of Hurricane Katrina, and let the change begin with us.