**23 Pentecost**

**October 23, 2016**

**In the name of the God of all Creation,**

**The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus**

**And the power of God known in the Holy Spirit.**

**Amen.**

Hurricane Matthew caused extraordinary devastation in our area. All of us know someone who has been displaced because of the damage to their homes … literally made homeless … some for a few weeks, many for a few months, and a few have lost their entire home … possessions and buildings. The piles of broken tree limbs, destroyed household possessions, and moldy drywall attest to the destructive force of rising sea water and high winds.

And we weren’t the only ones to suffer from Hurricane Matthew. My son, Christopher, lives in Eastern North Carolina where the swollen rivers engulfed whole towns. The little, no stoplight hamlet of Fair Bluff … just five miles from where Christopher lives … the village of Fair Bluff is on the banks of the Lumber River and overlooks Black Swamp … it was inundated with almost five feet of tea colored water. People lost the only pharmacy, hardware and grocery store for 20 miles in every direction.

Over a dozen families of this faith community of St. Cyprian’s were significantly impacted by Hurricane Matthew. Yes, there were tears. Yes, people have expressed anxiety and fear about what the next few weeks, months, even years will bring. And there is a general stress that is pervasive throughout the area. However, I have been amazed at the resilience of those effected the most. And I am encouraged by the generosity of so many, many people who offered shelter to evacuees, resources to the most vulnerable, and literally showed up to assist in the cleanup. Heartwarming stories of strangers helping strangers abound. And, in spite of the great losses that so many are facing I have yet to hear someone complain about their personal situation. Instead I hear things like, “I feel blessed that it wasn’t any worse. How can I help those who lost more than I did?”

And then … as if a hurricane wasn’t enough … there is a presidential election in just over two weeks. These are interesting times. So, what does our faith have to do with all this … if anything? Where do we find God in these interesting times?

Well, my words at this point may seem totally unrelated, but please bear with me. In August, when Caren and I came back from our trip to England, I reported to you that I felt like an accidental pilgrim … but probably not the kind of pilgrim you may think. Yes, I gloried at Salisbury and Canterbury Cathedrals. The architecture was amazing. The stained glass art work was outstanding. But that is not what touched me the most.

What fascinated me more than anything were some stone circles and courses of standing stones on a moor in Cornwall. I stood inside the homes of Bronze Age people, and I touched the same talisman objects that they had worshipped, and I looked into a stone grave box … still in the ground where it has been for 6,000 years. The people who lived on that moor so long ago knew the world in a very different way than we do today, and they knew the rhythms of life … sun, moon, stars, seasons … in a way that no one on earth today understands. And those stone circles and standing stones were the signs of the beginning of religion. In places like this, around the world, all kinds of different people were beginning to know something that was larger than they were … and they were entering the realm of the holy … the sacred. Those first humans who observed the sun as it moved across the landscape until it changed directions … those people who watched the moon wax and wane ... who with rudimentary calculations predicted eclipses ... those people became the shamans, the soothsayers, the sages … the first priests.

I have to confess that I cannot explain to you what God is. I believe Judaism has it right. In Judaism you do not write out or speak the word God” because to do so implies that God can be defined … and whatever God is, God is always greater than … larger than … anything we can imagine. But what I can say is, that for me, God wants all of creation to grow towards that which we call wholeness. In every situation, regardless of time or location … Bronze Age people on the moors of Cornwall, or Twenty-First Century people in St. Augustine … whatever it is that we call God wants the world to move beyond the status quo in a direction that brings more fullness to life.

Now let me say something about the lesson we read this morning from the prophet Joel. First of all, the name Joel comes from a combination of Yahweh/Jehovah and El … both of which are ancient Hebrew names for God. The name Joel means “my God is Yahweh.” (Think of the names Michael, Samuel, Daniel, Nathaniel, etc. They all end in “el” and are Hebrew in origin.) Secondly, unlike the prophet Jeremiah who was obviously writing to the Israelites following the Babylonian exile we do not know exactly when Joel was written, which means we don’t know what specific events he might have been writing about.

But here is what we know from the reading. Obviously the Israelites have gone through a difficult time. They have gone through a drought, a plague of locust, and a famine. But things are changing. Now they are having plentiful and timely rains. The prediction is that their barns will be full of grain, and their vats full of wine and olive oil. They will live in prosperous times.

However, all this is couched in a belief in a God who controls the universe, and does so depending upon the faithfulness of the Israelites. Obviously their famine was “caused” by unfaithfulness. But since they were convinced by their bad fortune that God was in control they have come back to faithfulness and are thus being rewarded with full barns and plenty of wine. But the reading ends with a threat to those who are not faithful to God …

*I will show portents in the heavens and on the earth, blood and fire and columns of smoke. The sun shall be turned to darkness, and the moon to blood, before the great and terrible day of the LORD comes. Then everyone who calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved; for in Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there shall be those who escape, as the LORD has said, and among the survivors shall be those whom the LORD calls.*

To be honest, this isn’t a God I can believe in. But I can also understand how the ancient Israelites could anthropomorphize what they called God, and use God to explain the events in their lives. I don’t believe that we are rewarded for faithfulness and punished for apostasy. However, the movement from famine to full barns of grain and vats of oil and wine is a move towards a more whole life for the Israelites, and that is a God I can believe in.

And then the story of the Pharisee and the tax collector. Jesus tells this as a parable. The Pharisees were those who stuck to the letter of the Jewish law. They did everything right … and therefore they were righteous. It's hard to imagine a more earnestly religious person than the Pharisee in this story. He prayed often, he fasted regularly, and he gave generously to the poor. His spiritual regimen was stringent. But he made two tragic mistakes in his religious life, one about himself, and one about other people, the combination of which is toxic to authentic spirituality.

First, the Pharisee "looked down on everybody else." Contempt for others lurks in the human heart, bubbling up easily and frequently. We imagine that in denigrating others we validate ourselves, or that at least we will compare favorably.

 The flip side of condescension toward others is justification of yourself. This was the Pharisee's second mistake. The Pharisee thanked God that he was "not like other people" — a thief, an evildoer, or an adulterer. His religious narcissism was a form of spiritual self-justification. The Pharisee has made the law an end in itself, not a means to a full life. Not only that but he is narcissistic and considers himself better than others because of it.

The tax collector, on the other hand, was one of those who was not Kosher … he handled the coin with the Emperor’s image on it, and he did it for the Romans. Thus he was “unclean” and outside the acceptable Jewish community.

The Pharisee was religiously righteous, the tax man extorted revenue for the Roman oppressors. The religious expert was smug and confident, the outcast was anxious and insecure. The saint paraded to the temple, the self-proclaimed “sinner” "stood at a distance"… as if his physical distance from the sacred building expressed his spiritual alienation. The Pharisee stood proud, the man estranged from his spiritual community looked down. In an act of shocking narcissism, the Pharisee prayed loudly "about himself" while the tax collector could barely pray at all. The Pharisee puffed out his chest in pride; the outsider beat his breast in sorrow.

The parable punch line announces a reversal. The respectable, reputable believer, so competent and accomplished, the one who had done everything right, was rejected. The disreputable, inadequate, and incompetent tax collector "went home justified before God." Once more the world was turned upside down.

But the ultimate point of all this for me is that the Pharisee loved his status quo … he had achieved his position at the top and was proud of it. The tax collector wanted nothing more than to find true wholeness in his life … he needed to move beyond the status quo … and recognized that he needed something beyond him to succeed.

So what does all this have to do with Hurricane Matthew and a presidential election? I’m sure that there are those whose entire life washed away in the flooding and were so attached to what they had gained, and what it said about who they were, that they are in deep grief. It is as if they lost not just their possession but they lost themselves. And I am sure that there are those who on the one hand blame God for this disaster, or on the other hand blame those who they deem “unrighteous” in the world around them for God’s anger displayed in a hurricane. But I don’t see any of those people here … and I have yet to see or hear about any of them in this greater community.

What I do see is people who are humbled by God’s creation. Yes, they may acknowledge humanity’s foolishness in thinking that we could defy the power of that creation … that somehow our technology has made us immune to the power of nature. But I also see people who are willing to participate in the goodness of what we call God by going out into a broken world and helping to make it better. They don’t define God as a being that controls the events of the world dependent upon the faithfulness of those affected. Rather they see God in everything … and everything in God … and they are willing to be a part of God by contributing to a world in such a way as to move towards wholeness … individual wholeness, wholeness of the community, and wholeness of the world. That is why they are willing to help strangers … because they recognize that we are all sisters and brothers on this one common planet. That is why they understand that they have lost possessions in this storm, but they are not personally devastated by it because it is just “stuff,” and their personal identity is not dependent upon “stuff.”

Finally, just so people don’t misunderstand my words, I believe in God, just not the God that is defined by any one faith expression … what I know as God is much more than that. And, yes, my faith is grounded in Jesus … a first century Jew by our reckoning of time … because I see in Jesus a person that has so transcended humanity that it is obvious that he fully comprehended what God is … and God is more than life itself. He lived a life that made the world a better place for his being in it. Jesus taught a life that moved people from brokenness to wholeness. And Jesus was willing to give his life so that the world might come closer to understanding who or what God is. That is the God of all Creation. That is the God that is alive in each of us just as God was alive in Jesus. And that is the God whose power is known in the Spirit that you and I live in this world every day. And that is why I take seriously what Jesus took seriously.

A Hurricane named Matthew. A presidential election. A prophet name Joel. A Pharisee and a tax collector. Stone circles and standing stones on a moor in Cornwall. And a God that is beyond naming.

Amen.