

STUDY GUIDE

Mitigated Disaster - Study Guide

By Rev. Dr. Michelle J. Morris

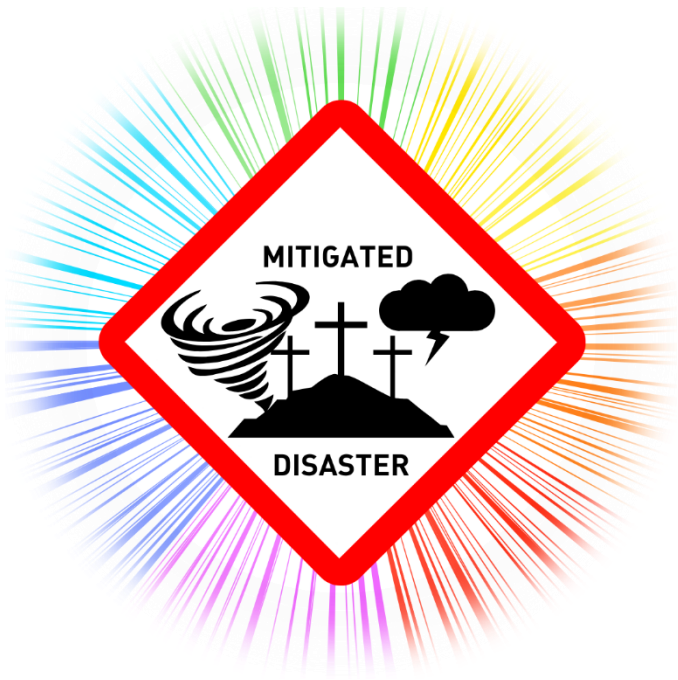
There is no greater disaster in the history of humanity than the cross. It is the full representation of our rejection of God, choosing hate and violence and death over the loving and full life that God extends to us. But God refuses for that to be the last word, so the horror of that moment does not come to an end there. Instead, there is an empty tomb, the full mitigation of the disaster of the cross.

Over the next few weeks, we will study the pattern of disaster recovery. We will start on Ash Wednesday by recognizing that we need to acknowledge such disasters will happen. Then, we will see how Jesus, in his role as prophet, acts as the storm warning system to get us ready. We will then journey through the widely acknowledged pattern of confronting disaster - mitigation, preparation, response, and recovery – before turning our eyes on Holy Week. All of that will lead us to the empty tomb, our ultimate hope beyond all of life's disasters!

I hope at the completion of this journey we will all have a better understanding of what it means to walk alongside each other through troubles. None of us escapes this life unscathed, but we are at our very best when we use the example of Christ to see beyond this moment to the hope of Easter, and when we wrap arms around each other and carry each other there. May this Lenten journey be one that challenges you, but may it also be one that blesses you. And through it all, may you feel the presence and power of Jesus Christ in all things and through all things as a beloved and seen child of God.

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**Ash Wednesday Half Week:
People, Get Ready!**

People, Get Ready!
Luke 3:1-18

My mother kept a journal of the first couple of years of my life, up until just before my little brother was born, and then she was too busy (little brothers spoil everything!). Mostly it is full of mundane details of the day, including firsts like steps and words and sentences, and a couple of firsts repeated again because she forgot I had already done them. But in the middle of these regular childhood moments, when I was about a year and a half old, the journal suddenly becomes a recounting of the tornado that tore Stillwater, Oklahoma apart on Friday, June 13, 1975. Besides what my mother recounted in the journal, I have collected lots of family stories and legends about that day. But for today, when we look at the words of John the Baptist, I need to recall the stories of the week leading into the day the tornado hit.

Growing up in Tornado Alley, you have a strange relationship with the wind. You tend to take it seriously and not seriously enough. Everyone knows someone whose life was rearranged by, or perhaps even lost to, a tornado. It is not if you will get hit by a tornado, but when, or at least it feels that way sometimes. But that same ominousness also creates a banality to it. Like the details my mother recounted of what I had to eat on a given day, Oklahomans talk about tornadoes just as if they are part of life.

That part of life also includes tornado sirens, and the week leading up to the Friday the 13th tornado,

the sirens apparently went off every evening. People had quit paying attention. Add to the frequent false alarms, there was also an old legend that Stillwater would never get hit by a tornado because it sat in a valley (for those of you familiar with Oklahoma's flat Great Plains geography, we know "valley" is a relative term). Rather than the sirens inspiring people to take cover, they were far more likely to either be ignored or draw people to sit on their front porches and look toward the sky.

It was only when those people did look at the sky that they saw there was good reason for the sirens.

In the first century, John the Baptist was not alone in calling people to repent. There is at least reasonable basis for the conjecture that John the Baptist was an Essene. Essenes lived outside of Jerusalem, convinced that the Temple and its authorities were corrupt. They purified themselves in ritual baths at a far greater regularity than other practicing Jews. Essenes called people to repent and cleanse themselves as well. They deeply studied the prophets and had a theology characterized by the impending doom of the apocalypse.

Now read Luke 3:1-18. Sound familiar?

So John, like other Essenes, was warning people to change their lives, and to recognize that the Messiah was coming. But that message wasn't confined to the Essenes. Zealots had a similar (though more political) message. Pharisees also critiqued the status quo. And this didn't just happen in the first century. Certainly

since Rome had seized Judea in 63 BCE, there was an outcry that the powers of this world would be overthrown and God's chosen would take the throne. And after Jesus would come, be executed and resurrected, and then ascended into heaven, the warnings would continue to keep watch for the Messiah. The warnings continue to this day.

What a cacophony of tornado sirens! How do we know which ones to pay attention to?

We can certainly do our research. There is great value in study, in seeking deeply to learn from the experts around us. Just like it helps to study wind and weather patterns, to utilize the latest technology to see what we couldn't see before, there is great value in studying God's word, and in learning from other people of faith who have been at this longer than we have.

We can also recognize that the wisdom of the world and the wisdom of God go hand-in-hand. As I began designing this series, I came across information in disaster recovery resources, such as those prepared by FEMA. Those resources discussed a typical pattern for addressing disasters in our world:

- Mitigation – doing the necessary work in advance that either prevents disasters or limits damage that disasters can do if they do come.
- Preparation – advance training, drilling, and developing plans that allow for agile and helpful response in the midst of disaster.

- Response – the immediate work of safety and rescue to get a community back to functional levels.
- Recovery – the extended work of repair and renewal that can take weeks, months, or years to complete.

As I looked at those stages of recovery, I realized Jesus had been hard at work on all of those as he prepared the disciples both for the disaster of the crucifixion and for the world-shifting reality of the mitigation of that disaster, the resurrection. Jesus serves as our primary faith meteorologist for teaching us not only how to come to terms with his own story, but also how to survive our own disasters in life, whether those are earthquakes or death of a loved one – or both. We continue to need faith meteorologists who help us recognize the conditions of God’s presence and love and God’s active work of recovery. In some cases, that leads us exactly where we need to be.

But then there is the value of standing on the porch.

John Wesley used the metaphor of a house to describe coming to understand and grow in God’s grace. He talked about prevenient grace, the grace that goes before us, the grace that is God’s call of love for us before we even know what faith is, as standing on the porch of faith. In prevenient grace, we have not quite entered the house, but we are at least standing on the welcoming threshold.

What causes us to go in the house? A conviction. A conviction that God loves us, but also a conviction that we are doomed if we don't run for the cover of that love. And maybe that conviction comes from study. But maybe that conviction comes from the hair standing up on our arms, electric with the fear of what life will be like without God's love.

John was willing to stand on the porch and shout for people to get in the house. He was sounding the sirens. He was warning people not to pay attention to false rumors, but to recognize the new reality before them. He was telling them how to get ready. For the crowds, the tax collectors, and the soldiers, he was effectively telling them what they needed to do to withstand the coming storm. And then he was bringing those people to the door. But he recognized he was not the one to bring people in. He did know, though, that the one who stood at the door was coming. Just get to the door and he will be there, and there would be cover. More cover than there is on the porch, and definitely more cover than there is in the yard!

So whether it is a faith meteorologist who inspires you to take cover, or the crazy old man screaming on the front porch, cover is cover. Get there. And get ready to ride out the storm. Because the storm is coming.

Questions for reflection and discussion:

1. Who has served as a faith meteorologist for you? Who has helped you recognize and grow in your faith?
2. Are you motivated in your faith more by the promise of love and life that God provides, or by trying to flee the disaster of not believing? Why does this motivate you?
3. Do you think you would have listened to John the Baptist? Why or why not?
4. Have you ever found yourself standing on the porch of faith, looking for a sign to head to Christ in the home of God?

Video Guide

This series is structured to parallel the stages of recovery discussed in the “People, Get Ready!” chapter. However, for the video, we interviewed people who were impacted by or helped in the recovery of the tornadoes we experienced in Northwest Arkansas on May 24, 2024. They narrate their stories mostly starting from the evening leading up to the night the tornadoes hit through the time when we videoed them (December 2024/January 2025). The videos pair the parts of their stories that match the stages. This does not match their narrative. The stages of disaster recovery described go from mitigation to preparation to response to recovery. The narratives of the people tend to have a small bit of preparation, then response, then recovery, then some reflection on preparation and mitigation again.

To help you keep up with the stories, here is a description of the people in the videos, as well as a brief summary of their story for your reference while you watch.

Roy and Shelley Lee – (couple sitting in chairs with painted cinderblock wall behind them) Disaster Response Coordinators in the Arkansas Conference, the Lees were on the ground almost immediately after the tornadoes hit and continue to coordinate recovery efforts in our area. They help train people in advance of disaster and deploy teams during and after.

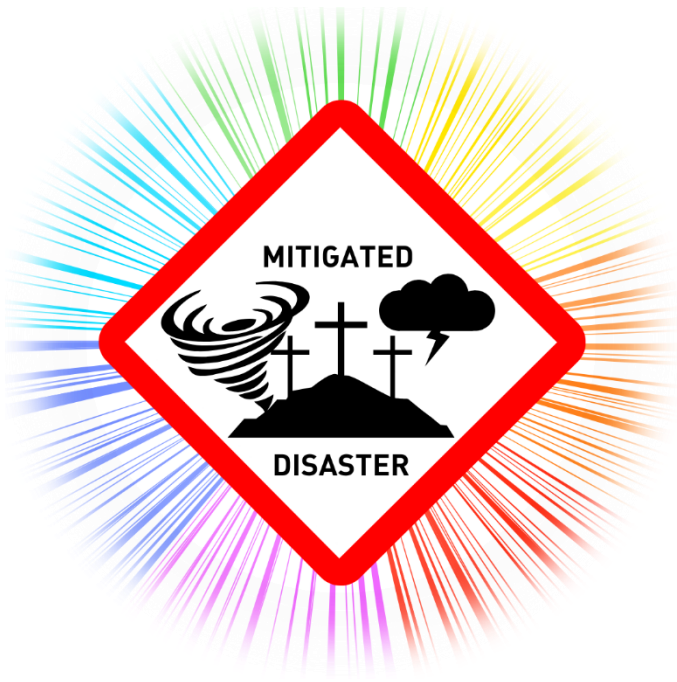
Rev. James Kjorlaug (pronounced chur-log) – (pastor in front of braced stained glass window) Rev. Kjorlaug is the Senior Pastor of First United Methodist Church in

downtown Rogers. FUMC Rogers sustained the most damage of the UMCs in our area, with a particular challenge of suction impact to an historic stained glass window. Rev. Kjorlaug's neighborhood was also hit and he had damage to his home.

Judge Barry and Cindy Moehring – (couple in a downtown office) Barry Moehring is the County Judge for Benton County, which includes the responsibility of activating, overseeing and maintaining disaster response for the whole county. His wife Cindy found herself taking care of their personal damage and also walking alongside her sister Connie Anderson through the disaster, as the Anderson's home took significant damage.

Brad and Connie Anderson – (couple on the couch; Connie is Cindy Moehring's sister) Brad and Connie sustained the worst damage of anyone in our congregation, including tree damage that caved in half of their home and pipes that burst and flooded their basement, which was also an occupied Air BnB the night of the tornado. Their home is still under renovation at the time of this study and likely will be for many more months.

Adam and Rebecca Kingree – (couple on stools with windows behind them) Adam and Rebecca had probably the next most extensive damage to their home after a hole was knocked in their roof and water filled much of the home causing a full-scale renovation. They had to relocate five people and two dogs to an apartment while renovations took place.



Week One:
Disaster is Coming

Week One – Disaster is Coming

Luke 4:1-13

The thing about facing a storm is that once you have been through one, you get better at it.

Maybe it is because I went through a tornado when I was a year and a half old, or maybe it was growing up in tornado alley, but I do have a knack for recognizing the conditions of a bad storm. It is a shift – in the feel of the air, in the smell of the wind, in the color of the sky. It has even given me a sense to recognize the kind of storm I have never been in.

One day my son and I walked out of Walmart, and I noticed a bunch of trash flying by and catching on the fence. It was a low, steady, forceful wind. For a moment, I stared at the pressed paper, and then instinctively I turned and faced the opposite direction. My eyes narrowed, and I snapped at my son, “Get in the van right now. We have a sandstorm to outrun.”

I had never actually been in a sandstorm, but I recognized one as soon as I saw it. Now let me tell you, it looks a lot like a smoggy day in the distance, or perhaps a wildfire. But it felt different. I can’t really say how, but my gut told me what it was. And that same gut also told me to get in a house. We pulled into our garage just as the paint on the side of the house was getting sandblasted, the storm having finally caught up with us.

In the Masterclass about Gut Health, gastroenterologist Dr. Emeran Mayer remarks that

phrases such as "Listening to your gut" are nearly universal across cultures. Perhaps that is because something physical actually happens to us in our guts when we recognize something is unsafe. Our bodies seem to have a built in storm warning system. Sometimes, though, it takes a while for us to learn to pay attention to that storm warning system. Sometimes we have to go through a few storms before we recognize that our internal system is more reliable than we once thought.

Each of the Gospels has distinct ways for portraying Jesus, and thankfully they collectively give us a much fuller picture than if we had only one Gospel to go on. In the Gospel of Luke, where we will spend this Lent, Jesus often stands in the role of prophet. When I ask people what prophets do, most often they will tell me that prophets predict the future. That is true – sort of. Prophets are not soothsayers or fortune tellers. Prophets are at times given special revelations from God, but otherwise, these are the people who are really good at listening to their gut. They have overdeveloped storm warning systems.

Luke gives us a picture of Jesus that puts the humanity of Jesus as a serious partner with the divinity of Jesus. In fact, it is arguable that Luke emphasizes Jesus' humanity much more than Jesus' divinity. Luke very much wants Jesus connected to the nitty gritty of human existence. This is evident not just in sharing Jesus' humble beginnings, but in sharing such details as "Jesus matured in wisdom and years," (Luke 2:52) implying at the very least that the human body Jesus

inhabited had to grow before it could contain the full wisdom of God.

So now put yourself in the position of hearing the unfolding narrative of Luke's Gospel. Chapter 2 ends with you learning about Jesus having to grow in wisdom, then we dodge off to hear the dire warnings of John the Baptist, learn of Jesus' baptism and get Jesus' genealogy, and then the very next thing we hear is the story of the temptation. Wait, a freshly baptized Jesus, one who last we heard was still growing in wisdom, is now up against the devil?!?!? This can't be good! How can Jesus possibly hold up against the devil in these conditions?

Turns out, Jesus has a very well-developed storm warning system.

Jesus faces each of the temptations the devil puts before him with the proper gut reaction – relying on what he knows to be true: God's word. His godly gut gave him exactly the right responses to keep the storm at bay. We know, again from previous passages in Luke, that Jesus had studied God's word and knew it well enough to teach others from a very young age. He had done his preparation, an important step in disaster recovery we will discuss more in a couple of weeks. That preparation helped when his warning system went off, and he was able to avoid disaster altogether.

Ultimately, that is what God seeks for all of us. I truly believe that God does not wish any of us to go through life's disasters. God seeks for all creation a return to the garden paradise that God initially created

for us. That gut instinct in us, that storm warning system built into our physical bodies, is a God-given gift to try to keep us from harm.

But more forces are at work in this world than just God's will. We have our free will, and we have broken systems, and a fallen world, and at times those manifest into disasters. Even when we are our most prepared, those disasters still come. We know that. And Christ knows that. That's why we are shored up for making it through such disasters when we shore up our faith. Faith will carry us through when even the best storm warning systems can't keep us from the coming flood.

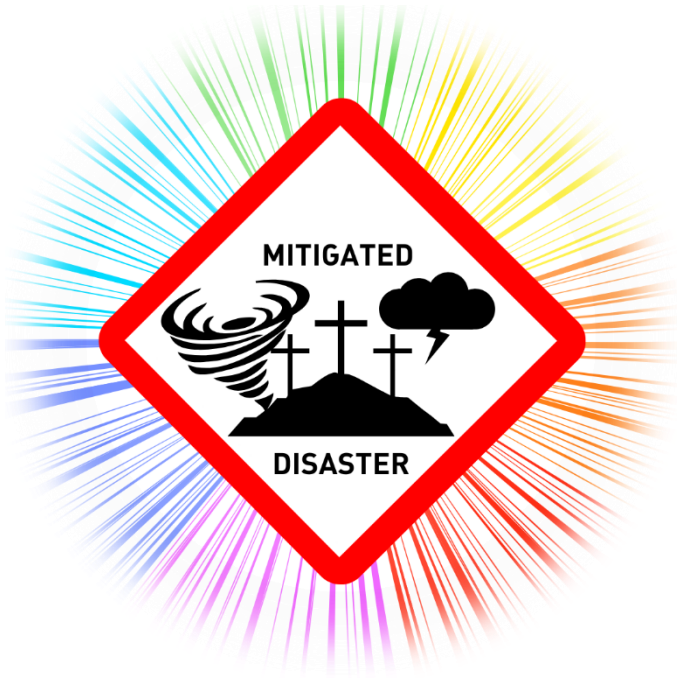
Even Jesus would face such disaster. And we all know it is coming. This passage ends with the siren sound of what is ahead, some of the most ominous words in all of Scripture: "After finishing every temptation, the devil departed from him until the next opportunity."

Disaster is coming. Time to get ready.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. What is the worst storm (real or metaphorical) that you have ever faced in your life? Were there warning signs that this storm was coming?

2. Have you recognized trouble based on a gut feeling? Did you listen to your gut? Why or why not?
3. The stories in the video this week talk about the warnings they had that allowed them to take cover. Have you ever heard a warning and been able to avoid disaster?
4. What does it mean to you to think about Jesus as growing in wisdom? How do you understand that idea in light of Jesus also being God?
5. What other prophets besides Jesus have you studied or known? What makes a good prophet?



Week Two:
Mitigation

Week Two – Mitigation

Luke 6:46-49

What is your foundation?

I wonder how often we think about that question. We probably do when we are building houses. No one intends to build a house on something that shifts beneath us. We all expect to build our houses on solid ground.

But then we also have a whole lot of places where we want to live. When we build houses there, we cannot guarantee a solid foundation. When my family and I lived in Texas, we had to water our house. Yes, that's right. We had to water our house. We had to do this because the ground beneath the house had clay in the soil, and clay is a shape-shifter. When wet, it swells up. When dry, it shrinks and cracks. All that soil movement threatened the foundation of our house. So, in the midst of a drought, in which water was deeply restricted in use, people still had permission to water their houses. Otherwise, the impact could have been catastrophic. But as we turned on the faucet every day, I felt the waste of what we were doing, all because we wanted to live on this soil that perhaps was not meant to have a giant house pressing down upon it.

On the other extreme, houses that are built in Alaska require drilling to see how much permafrost would be beneath the foundation. When you build a house on top of permafrost, you run the risk of the warmth of the home melting the soil beneath, turning it

to mud and shifting the foundation, perhaps even making the house crack and slide apart. If there is too much permafrost and no assurance that a cooling system built beneath the house can maintain the frozen ground (yes, that's right – some houses in ALASKA have to have cooling systems beneath them), banks will not finance the build. Despite the complications, we still build homes there.

Then, for those of us alive in the early 2000s, we remember the challenge of building a house on the edge of the sea that sits below sea level. When the levees broke in New Orleans in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, thousands and thousands of houses and other buildings were washed away under the coming flood.

We are bound and determined to test the strengths of foundations.

In disaster recovery, the first stage is mitigation. Mitigation involves taking actions first that keep disasters from ever happening. Another piece of mitigation is taking measures that expect there will be a disaster and doing things that keep the disaster from causing damage.

The passage for this week assumes a flood. It encourages people to build their homes expecting that disaster and building on a foundation that will not wash out from under us.

But is Jesus really talking about constructing a building? No. Jesus is talking about following him and doing so in a way that transforms your life so that when

life's disasters come, you can withstand them. The passages that lead into this one are passages that encourage those who follow Jesus to pay attention to their own development. A disciple does not focus on the struggles or flaws of others, but instead focuses on developing self-discipline – taking the log out of our own eye before the splinter out of others. We are reminded to nurture our own growth like a fruit-bearing tree, and to store up on the Lord's goodness in our soul treasury.

Then Jesus turns to the foundation metaphor. All of these images are about planning and cultivation, making choices and serving in ways that nurture goodness and faith in us. Why is this work necessary? Because the flood is coming.

What is the flood? Life.

Jesus is trying to prepare his disciples for the challenges that are inevitably before them. For the people he is speaking to in that first century moment, he knows the crucifixion is ahead, and then persecution for those who will carry his message on from there. But for all the disciples who will follow, Jesus knows we do not live in the fullness of the reign of God yet. Without that fullness, we will absolutely face challenges just making our way through life in a fallen world. We will face judgment, oppression, sickness, and death. We will be betrayed, have our hearts broken, make decisions that bring us trouble, and lose people we love. Life is hard. We need a solid foundation just to keep standing some days.

As a pastor, I have done many funerals. Most of the funerals are for members of our church, but a few have been for people with no faith community. There is a stark difference in those funerals. The ones where the family has no faith are so horrifically sad. They mourn at a depth I just do not see when I do a funeral for people of faith. Why? Because this goodbye feels like forever. They lack a key coping element: hope. In contrast, a funeral for someone who believed, or a family who has faith, is full of celebration. Yes, there is still sadness, and yes, there are still tears. But this goodbye is temporary. They can also celebrate that the one they love is in the fullness of love and life. That is the rock solid foundation on which they stand, because they stand on faith in Jesus Christ.

That faith knows the mitigation of disaster in the assurance of the resurrection. We opened this passage with a reflection on what mitigation means. It means either taking steps to make sure there is no damage from a disaster, *or it stops the disaster from ever happening*. Because faith reframes how we view the events of this world, it is true that in some cases our damage is minimal, or just doesn't have the same impact on us. But it also means that some disasters never happen. How does that work? Because the people of faith are convicted to make this world better. So we build schools that allow people to escape poverty. We build houses so people have proper shelter. We cover the continent of Africa with mosquito nets so children never die from malaria. We build hospitals and send medical personnel so people get

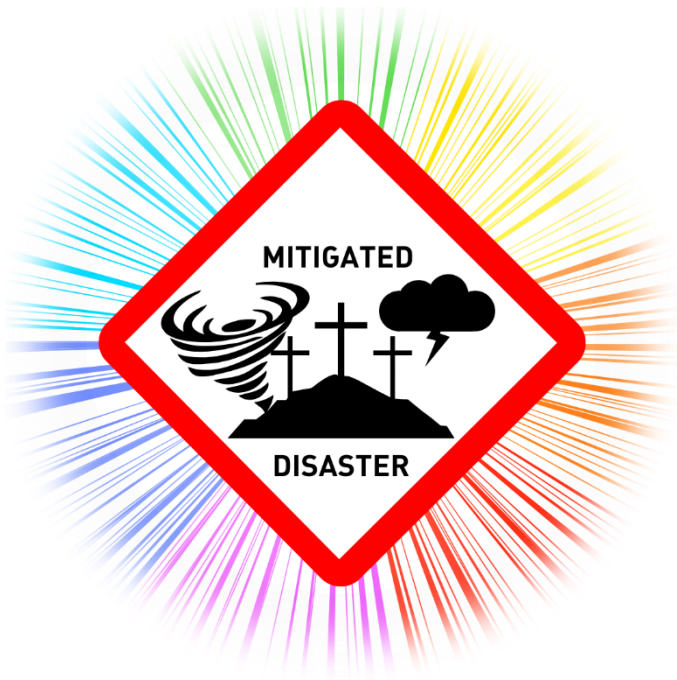
both emergency and preventive health care to live longer, fuller lives.

And, when it comes to preventing the kind of natural disasters that frame this study, we do that kind of work too. The 2024 (2020) General Conference of the United Methodist Church just charged all of our churches to develop a team working on environmental issues. FUMC Bentonville started that work one year ahead of that challenge. We have installed a water bottle filling station, moved to using reusable or compostable dishes for events when possible, switched to compostable communion cups, and held an environmental fair to bring organizations working on environmental issues into contact with the public. In the coming months and years, we will put a challenge before the congregation to invest in motion control light switches, replace windows with more energy efficient ones, and look at installing solar power. Gradually we are moving our foundation from sand to stone, ensuring greater efficiency and longevity for our church, and hopefully doing our part to correct the dysfunction of our natural environment as well.

Jesus is urging all of us to take the time to do the work to prepare for and prevent the disasters of life. Some of that is soul work. Some of it is concrete transformation of the conditions of our world. Like the resurrection will mitigate the power of death, faith in Christ mitigates disaster. May that be the work that we do as ones who love and follow Christ.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. Has your faith ever given you hope in the midst of a difficult situation?
2. Have you seen someone without faith struggle with a challenge in life?
3. Have you been part of the work of faith that minimized a disaster?
4. Have you been part of the work of faith that completely prevented a disaster?
5. What work can you do as a person of faith to minimize the environmental difficulties we currently face?
6. In the video, Shelley Lee challenges us we may need to cut down some trees to prevent disasters. What are some hard decisions you can imagine may need to be made to mitigate disasters?



Week Three:
Preparation

Week Three – Preparation

Luke 6:27-38

“Be prepared.” I was never a Boy Scout for obvious reasons, though now that they are the Scouts of America I could be. I do appreciate their motto, though, and I have definitely learned good lessons about preparation (and inclusion, for that matter) from my friends and colleagues who were Boy Scouts. I was a Brownie Scout, however, and my mother was our Scout Leader. She was not interested in teaching us how to sew (sewing camping seats was part of the Brownie curriculum), probably because she failed the sewing portion of home economics when she was in high school. She was interested instead in preparing us for potential dangers in the world. So, we learned how to read labels on household bottles to determine what chemicals were poisonous. We also learned what chemicals we should not mix. I remember practicing “Stop, Drop, and Roll” more times than we could count, preparing us should we ever catch on fire (but probably also keeping us busy while we waited for parents to come pick everyone up).

So as a child I was ready should I or my friends burst into flames. But also as a child growing up in Oklahoma, I was prepared to run for cover from tornadoes, and in part I was ready to do so because we had a tornado kit. What was in such a kit? First, remember this was the 1970’s and 1980’s, so get the idea of a smart phone, which would replace many items on this list, out of your head. Having properly framed history for you, in our tornado kit were: water, saltine

crackers, a small radio, a flashlight, some batteries, and a whistle. Why those particular things? They prepared us for loss of power and for being buried under debris. The flashlight and batteries helped with power loss. The whistle and water and saltine crackers were to help with being stuck under debris. The radio did double duty because it kept us informed of conditions and could also generate noise if we were trapped to draw rescue personnel to us. What I could never prepare for was getting up the nerve to go into the creepy storm cellar located in the backyard. It was a concrete lined 7'x10' room that was damp and infested by spiders. It took a lot of chutzpah to walk down those stairs into that hole. Only the threat of mortal danger would make it worth it.

Having a tornado kit was only one step in the preparation for disaster though. There were at least two other steps. The first was to regularly check the tornado kit. We were supposed to do so at least once a year. We would replace the sleeve of saltine crackers and freshen the water. We would also check and usually replace the batteries, both the spare batteries and the batteries in the flashlight and radio. They weren't thrown away but transferred to items with lower stakes, like a boombox or a toy. Now, it might be easy enough to forget to do this update, except in the spring our local television meteorologists would remind us it was time to check our kits.

What was the other preparation? Drills. Just like my Brownie Scout Leader mom had us practice stop, drop, and roll in case we caught fire, we had to

practice running for cover so we knew exactly where we were supposed to go in case of emergency. We practiced taking cover at home and at school. In fact, often to illustrate the shifts in our cultural realities, I like to point out that my generation (GenX) practiced taking cover from tornadoes, earthquakes, nuclear war, and school shootings. Miraculously, every one of those drills usually involved hiding under a school desk. School desks must have had magical protective powers in those days.

A few years ago, looking into safety regulations for our Board of Trustees, I discovered that the United Methodist Book of Discipline suggests that the entire congregation of any UMC yearly practice what to do in case of an emergency. In my entire time in a UMC, or any church for that matter, I have only seen that practiced one time, and it was the year I made that discovery and led my churches through disaster drills. It makes sense to do them with some regularity, however, because we would also be trying to move a significantly sized group of people out of an enclosed or exposed space to a place of protection. Ironically, we would most likely be trying to move a group from the Sanctuary to a place of sanctuary.

But we don't just need to be doing drills that keep us safe in case of environmental disaster. We also need to be doing drills that keep us safe from spiritual disaster. This week's passage, Luke 6:27-38, comes from the Sermon on the Plain. Like he does in the parallel Sermon on the Mount in Matthew, Jesus is here teaching the gathered crowd important things to

remember and core practices of this faith. At the heart of this passage is the practice of love, and very specifically the love of our enemies. As Jesus points out, loving people who love you is easy. Loving those who hate you requires real discipline.

Loving those who hate you is love's emergency drill. If we can get that practice down, then love of all becomes second nature. No matter what happens in life, no matter how many struggles, tragedies, or emergencies befall us, if our default setting is love, we can find all of those situations more manageable. Why? Because love necessarily pushes out the emotions that make such moments so much worse. As we are told in 1 John 4:18, perfect love drives out fear. Fear causes us to behave irrationally, with panic rather than with measured minds. Love also forces out anger, which otherwise would cause us to behave in rash, potentially violent ways. And of course love drives out hate, hate which makes us judgmental, self-centered, and isolated from others who could aid us when we are in trouble.

Practicing love of those we hate makes all love flow more naturally from us. When the sirens go off in our life, then, we are better prepared for the situation before us because we are already prepared to love. Out of that love flows generosity, the generosity that would extend to someone both your coat and your shirt. Out of that love flows compassion, a willingness to see from another perspective. Out of that love flows forgiveness, which eliminates the stress of anger, division, and grudges, all of which require enormous energy to maintain. This is the practice of the golden rule: treat

others as you wish to be treated. And Jesus' promise is that "The portion you give will determine the portion you receive in return."

Jesus is, in other words, challenging us to practice **discipleship**. It is out of the practice of discipleship that the rewards of faith will come. We run these drills of discipleship alongside others, and with the guidance of more seasoned disciples as well. Like the teacher who lines us up to get safely outside in a fire drill, we need people who will show us what it means to love. We also need the guidance of the Holy Spirit to nurture this growth in us. Think of the Apostle Paul offering these words to the Philippians, "Therefore, my loved ones, just as you always obey me, not just when I am present but now even more while I am away, carry out your own salvation with fear and trembling. God is the one who enables you both to want and to actually live out his good purposes." (Philippians 2:12-13) In those two verses we are reminded to follow the example of seasoned disciples and step into the enabling power God gives us. But it also reminds us of our own role and responsibility for salvation. Jesus may offer salvation to us all, but we have to be willing to receive it. Then, once we have received it, we have work to do. We have drills to run. We must be ready to practice what is preached.

I am grateful for my Brownie Scout training, which has thus far kept me safe from poisonous chemicals. I haven't ever caught fire, other than with the Holy Spirit, to test stop, drop, and roll yet. I am grateful I have known where and how to take cover

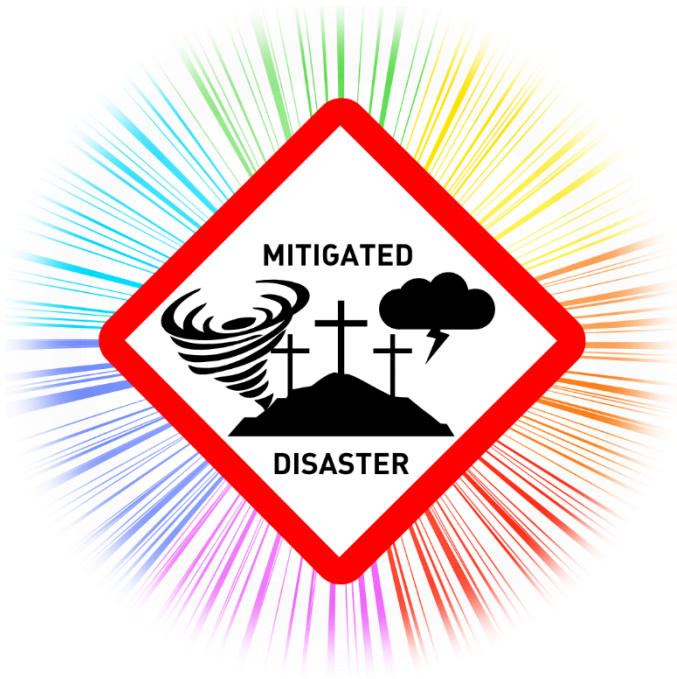
when tornadoes have been a threat. I am also grateful that many other disciples of Jesus have practiced their faith and been a model for me in how I might love others better.

And, as we will see in the next chapter, I am so very, very grateful that some of those disciples knew that a way they could love was to learn how to wield a chainsaw safely, so they practiced in advance of a disaster to learn how to do just that. That kind of preparatory discipleship very literally set my people free.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. When have you run drills in your life? What have those drills taught you?
2. What practices constitute faith drills for you?
3. When have you tried loving your enemy? What did you learn about the discipline of love?
4. What is something you worked hard in your life to be prepared for? Did that preparation help you?
5. How does preparation benefit you as a person of faith?
6. As you watch the videos, you will learn about trainings that people took before disasters happened that were then enormously helpful. Are there any such trainings you would consider undergoing to respond in an emergency?

7. In the video, Judge Moehring talked about how incredibly fast and effective faith-based organizations were in the aftermath. Why do you think that was true?



Week Four:
Response

Week Four – Response

Luke 10:25-37

It was my very first night in my new home, a Jayco Redhawk RV. I rent a space from a parishioner with extensive land that happens to also include an RV hook up. We had spent the evening getting me all plugged in and I had passed out exhausted, still in my clothes. Why in the world did I think moving in on a Saturday night was a good idea? At least our Associate Pastor Ray was preaching that coming morning, and then I had all day Monday – Memorial Day 2024, to finish getting settled.

The first time my phone rang at nearly 1 a.m. while the rain whipped my RV around, I ignored it. I am not scared of a little rain and don't need to be checked on. The second time, though, I picked up the phone to hear my neighbor tell me to run get in her truck so she could drive to the other side of the property where her son had a basement. A tornado was coming.

I got to meet her family in that basement, as we all huddled in the darkness: adults, kids, pets and all. I pulled up the local news and watched as the tornado barreled down on our community. One by one I watched as parishioners and staff both were in the path. I also watched as the tornado that popped up over Bentonville did an odd thing. It sat over our town and churned for what seemed to be 15 minutes. It had all the signatures of a tornado, but no confirmed touchdown. Then, either that tornado or one spawned from the same storm headed east of us into Rogers.

When the all clear sounded about an hour later, we stopped and checked on the turkeys on her farm and made our way back to the house. Everything was still intact, except a couple of downed trees, and my RV had no power, though the house did thanks to a generator. I came into her house and she opened her guest bedroom, but it was clear there would be no sleeping that night. I had a few hours to make the call on how we would proceed with worship and then to figure out how all my people were doing.

After a short online reflection on where God is in a whirlwind, thanks to an inspiration to turn to the end of Job, I began checking on my people and assessing the damage to the church. It was clear, however, that I could not get into town. Too many roads were blocked by downed trees, and emergency personnel were begging people not to get out if at all possible. I did have parishioners who lived close to the church, however. They reported that we had damage to our outside sheds and some trees down, but no other notable damage.

Practically everyone else was not so lucky.

Gratefully, we had no fatalities from the tornado in our town, but the damage was extensive. Of a congregation of 600 people, nearly half had damage to their homes and property. As badly as our town was hit, Decatur to our west and Rogers to our east were hit even worse. Decatur was hit by the widest tornado in Arkansas recorded history. The main road in Rogers for businesses was leveled for miles, and neighborhoods

were buried in debris. As for Bentonville, it appeared as if every old or tall tree was ripped up by its roots and crashed down in every direction around us. The devastation was extensive everywhere.

But before the dust and debris even had time to settle, the church was at work doing what the church does – helping people in trouble.

When I say the church, I do mean the United Methodist Church. UMCOR (the United Methodist Committee on Relief) had teams in place almost immediately. But I also mean the church universal. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints sent teams out, as did several of the nondenominational churches in the area. I heard from my people that the Baptists had shown up and helped clear trees from their yard. While there were definitely groups of people in neighborhoods who just started helping people around them, it was the churches that sprung into action and were organized quickly all around the area to get people to safety and to get debris off their homes.

It was a cacophonous chorus of chainsaws, and it was music to all our ears for quite a while.

And it was not just the effort to immediately free people. We had to get generators to people on oxygen. We had to get food to people who had lost electricity. We needed to provide cool places of refuge for people who needed air conditioning, or who just needed a quiet place to cry. Our church happens to be on the same grid line as the Walmart Home Offices. We always have electricity restored rapidly. As far as we can

tell, we were only without power for about 2 hours. As soon as we could safely get there, we opened the church for anyone who needed power – to charge phones, work online, or just have a cool place to catch their breath. We also quickly became a center point for response. It is hard to explain how miraculous that whole week was. Every time I would be texted about a need in the community, the next text coming in would be someone offering to fill that need – without even knowing I had just been texted with such a request. It was as if God was lining up the people with needs and the people with resources one after the other.

While I was working about 18 hours a day for about 3 weeks, I would pause at times and marvel at the miracle of it all. I would also recognize that this was one long parable in action – we were living the parable of the Good Samaritan.

The Good Samaritan did not see a man who had a different religious identity than he did. The Good Samaritan did not see a man who would make him unclean if he helped him. The Good Samaritan did not see someone who might be luring him into trouble. The Good Samaritan saw a man in life threatening circumstances, and the Good Samaritan helped him. The Good Samaritan went to trouble and expense to help someone who might never be able to thank him, much less repay him. The Good Samaritan just saw a man in trouble and responded. No questions asked.

When we are in the midst of a disaster, we need Good Samaritans. We need people who are willing

to take a chance, to risk their own safety and resources to help. Many of the people who grabbed a chainsaw and helped clear trees were trained in disaster response, and those teams are still coming to our area to this day. But many of the people who helped just saw a need, knew they could fill it, and took care of that need in front of them. People loaned generators to strangers, gave gas cards to chainsaw teams, broke down doors to check on elderly neighbors, whatever they needed to do.

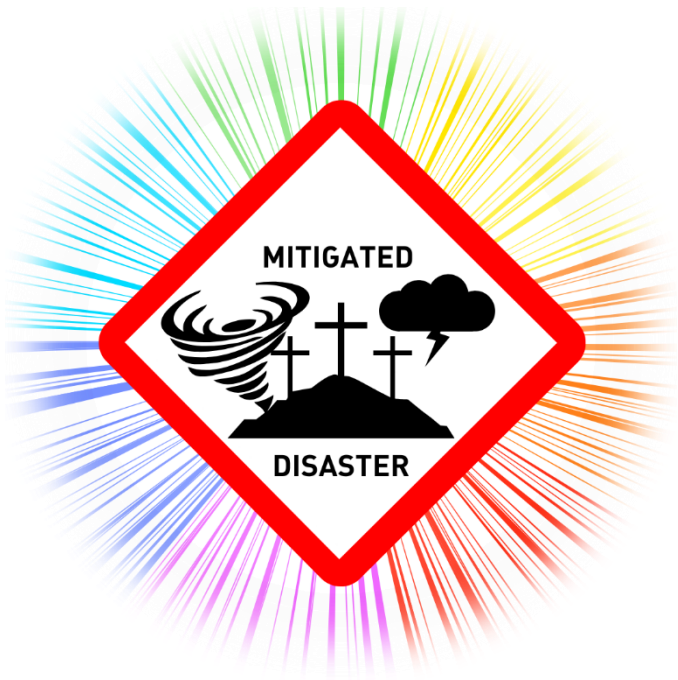
God created us to take care. God charged us with care for the earth at the very beginning of our creation (Genesis 1:28). God talked about us caring for the fish and the birds, but we are also charged with caring for each other. We are created to be helpers of one another (Genesis 2:18) and when we do that, we fulfill who God means for us to be. When there is disaster before us, whether that is a tornado, a flood, a fire, or life disasters like divorce, depression, job loss, sickness, or death, we are to respond to that need before us. We are to be the Good Samaritans for one another.

Fred Rogers, the beloved creator of Mister Rogers Neighborhood, was a great advocate for the Good Samaritans. He encouraged us all to take care of the people around us. But he also comforted children by reminding us that when there is trouble, we just have to look around. The helpers are always there.

The helpers are always there. Thanks be to God.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. Has a Good Samaritan ever come to your aid?
2. Have you had the opportunity to be a Good Samaritan for someone else?
3. Have you ever chosen not to help someone else in need? Why did you make that choice? How do you feel about that choice now?
4. Have you ever seen a need arise immediately followed by the solution to that need? How do you think God was at work in that moment?
5. In the video, Roy Lee shares about a 95 year-old man who helped in Little Rock tornadoes by just sharing in conversation with people. Cindy Moehring talked about her family who had been through the Joplin tornado and knew what they needed before they asked. Based on your life experiences, personality, or available resources, what are some immediate needs you could provide for a neighbor in trouble?



Week Five:
Recovery

Week Five – Recovery

Luke 13:10-17; 18:1-8

In the midst of the exhausting days immediately following the tornado, I called a fellow pastor whose church had been leveled by a different tornado a year before. I wanted his wisdom. I needed to know how I was supposed to have the energy to keep going. He was honest, but not encouraging. “This is your ministry now,” he said. “For at least a year.”

That was the biggest shock after the initial day of taking in the devastation: how long we would be working at recovering from an event that took less than an hour. That small amount of time when the tornado cut through our area would shape minutes, hours, days, and months, perhaps even years, to come. Even today, 7 months after that May day, I drove by piles of downed trees, roots exposed and rotting away, on our main road in town.

Our church continues to make space for disaster recovery teams to come in, the efforts now classified as long term recovery. Who are they still helping at this point? Primarily those in our community who had either lost, couldn’t afford, or have been denied insurance coverage, or those who had damage that insurance would not cover. In the immediate aftermath, we learned the limits of such coverage. For instance, many learned that insurance would only remove trees that hit structures. But that still left trees laying across areas that created safety challenges for pets and children. It also left trees leaning against other

trees, exacerbating fears of the next storm and the damage that would happen when the leaning tree pushed the other tree down. Cutting down or cutting up trees is not cheap. Many people faced removal costs in the tens of thousands of dollars, money they did not have.

And of course there were still homes that needed significant repair. Disaster recovery teams were working on those with little to no insurance coverage. But even those with wonderful coverage, like Brad and Connie Anderson in the video, faced the challenge of too much demand on contractors. Their home gets piecemeal work, sandwiched in between the smaller numerous jobs that their contractors are trying to finish before they turn full attention to their home. In the meantime, they wait. They have a rented roof over their heads, but it isn't really their roof. It isn't really their home.

Adam and Rebecca Kingree echoed the grief of losing their home. The tornado meant they had a chance to remodel, but as Rebecca shared, why would you remodel something you already loved? Both the Andersons and the Kingrees spoke to the less tangible, more haunting aspect of recovery: recovering from the mental anguish and emotional impact. As Rebecca talked about the loss of her sense of safety, I remembered the weeks following the tornado. We were plagued that summer by storms, and storms that seemed to suddenly appear around 1 a.m. I would wake up and yell at the sky, "Quit it! Please leave us alone! This is too much stress!" Then, in the late fall, we had

yet another tornado come through. Rogers was hit again, including a family from Rev. Kjorlaug's congregation that was also hit in May. As Judge Barry Moehring shared, it also means more demand on county resources and continued focus at the governmental level as well. Each instance triggers real trauma reactions which will likely continue to be with us for a long time coming.

A long time coming. That might be the most accurate phrase when it comes to recovery. We don't really realize how long we will be recovering until we are in the midst of it. The length of time it takes – it can wear you down. I remember how the sound of chainsaws went from music to our ears in the first few weeks to nails on a chalkboard over the months. With trees still down around us, homes still unfinished, and hearts still in mourning, it can be hard to sustain hope.

I wonder if the bent over woman still had hope? After 18 years of looking at her feet, unable to truly look people eye-to-eye, was she resigned to her fate? We don't know what led her to that condition. It is likely that it was a gradual unfolding, particularly if she had osteoporosis. But it could have been the result of an accident and been more sudden. Regardless, she had eighteen years of physical pain. She also had eighteen years of struggling to connect and communicate with people, staring at the ground. She had eighteen years of sitting at the back of the synagogue, present and isolated all at the same time. Did she even have a wish anymore to see differently, to stand differently, to live differently?

And how about the widow? She needed justice. Something was wrong that needed correction. She was beyond frustrated, because she could not get the judge, the one who could change her situation, to pay attention to her. It makes me think about our situation here. We are not unlike any disaster these days. The news focused on us for a week or two, but then there was another disaster to cover. As I mentioned in the first video for this series, shortly before we filmed, Los Angeles was engulfed in flames in what will likely be the costliest disaster to date in the United States, and the southern coast of the U.S. was shut down for a week, Interstate 10 covered with snow from Houston to Florida. Disasters are short attention span theater these days. But the need for attention to continue to be paid remains for weeks and months and years beyond. Like the widow, we need people to notice. There are still situations that need to be made right. Those who need help need someone to see them, need someone to tell them, as Shelley Lee said, that they are not forgotten.

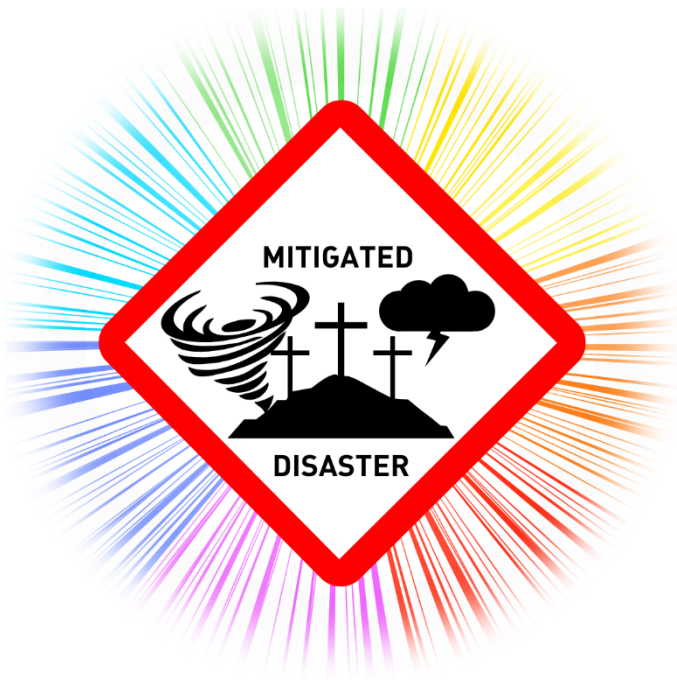
Jesus gives voice to both of these women. By sharing the story of the widow before the judge, he reminds us that the problem is not the one who keeps drawing attention to the need. The problem is the one who is ignoring it. It is a reminder to us not to be distracted by the next moment, but to hold focus, to dig deep, to do the work that needs to still be done.

Then, in seeing the woman at the back of the synagogue, calling her forth, and healing her, we are reminded not to lose hope. When it seems like we are forgotten, when it seems like we have faded into the

fate that was handed to us, Jesus still sees us and calls out. He called the woman from the back to be seen and restored. And he calls out to his people still, to tell us to keep at the work of recovery. Yes, to show up in the immediate aftermath, but to also dig in and keep at it. And to do the work that doesn't just rebuild houses, but also rebuilds hearts. The work that lets people stand tall again, to breathe deeply, to look eye-to-eye with the founder of love and security and know ourselves saved. That, my friends, is what it means to recover.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. Have you been through something that involved a long recovery? What surprised you most about that process?
2. Have you helped someone else through recovery? How long did you stay at that work?
3. When have you seen the ill effects of something not getting the attention that it needs? How would sustained attention have made a difference?
4. Imagine you are the Bent Over Woman or the Widow before the Unjust Judge. Describe how you would have felt before your need was met. What would it feel like to either be cured or have justice? What difference would it make in your life?
5. How can we pay better attention to needs in our world when there are so many to take into account?



Week Six:
Disaster is Here!

Week Six – Disaster is Here!
Luke 23:13-25; 23:44-46

Jesus has spent the years with his disciples getting them ready. He has told them to build their foundation on rock. He has prepared them with instructions of faith. He has given them the Samaritan example of how to respond. And he has reminded them that there is a long process to overcoming their past and creating a new path. He has done all he can to get them ready. And they better be ready.

Because disaster is here.

I have been part of dramatic recreations of Holy Week. I have been part of many kinds of special services, from those honoring Palm Sunday, to sharing communion or washing feet on Maundy Thursday, to stripping the altar or leading a Tenebrae service on Good Friday. I have even led churches through the chaos of pandemic worship in Holy Week. I don't think any of those fully captured for me, though, what Holy Week must have been like.

Now I do think I have a sense. I think it feels like going through a natural disaster.

Holy Week must have felt incredibly disastrous. There was a crush of people in Jerusalem for Passover. The military was present and on high alert. In the midst of just the reality of celebration, there is this upstart leader who has come to town and created even more of a stir. And there are crowds, and pushing, and then moments of quiet. Moments of tired people gathered

around a table, trying to make sense of what is going on around them. There are threats, and overturned tables, and madness in the streets. There were acts of heroism and acts of cowardice, and acts of people who were just confused in the moment. And there were quiet, mournful aching prayers. A wish for things to be any other way than this. There was loss, aggravation, betrayal, anger. There was corruption and righteousness. There was law and order and lawlessness and chaos. There were hopes and dreams dashed, ordinary ways of living rearranged, and fear and tears abundant. And there was death. Despite the warnings, the death happened anyway. And the earth shook, and the temple curtain tore, and the sky turned black. And it all seemed like everything was finished... forever.

I hope you never have to go through a natural disaster. But quite honestly, I can't imagine you avoiding one. They are getting so frequent and so prevalent. If you have been through one, then I imagine much of the paragraph I just wrote to describe Holy Week resonates with you and your experience. Looking back, you likely knew something of a warning. And in the midst, you may have huddled in fear, may have sprung into action, may have ignored what was happening, or may have run for your lives – there are any number of responses based on the myriads of disasters we face. In the aftermath, there was the shock of it all. And you likely saw people at their very best, and people at their very worst.

I think about the night of the tornado. Huddling in the basement. Was that like huddling in the Upper

Room? Listening to the crash of the storm around me. Was that like witnessing Jesus on trial? Watching him haul the cross through the street. Was that like seeing the debris on the road? Watching him get nailed to the cross. Was that like standing next to the Andersons in the hall of their destroyed home, knowing their lives would never be the same going forward? And watching him die on the cross. Was that like looking around my town at so much loss, so much devastation, so much... so much? Too much grief to even process.

And as I think about the Andersons and the Kingrees, and all the people who had to pick up their lives, I recognize that it is not just a collective disaster, but one that is borne on the backs of so many wonderful people, people who were just going through their lives and then everything was turned upside down. As I think of each of them, I also remember that disaster also comes in other forms too. Divorce. Job loss. A cancer diagnosis. Suicide. Fatal accidents. The shock of any of those events can also create Holy Week level chaos. How do we find the hope? How do we keep going on?

Turn your eyes upon Jesus.

Jesus is the perfect example of both an individual carrying the crushing reality of disaster and a collective symbol of human and divine cooperation through the absolute worst of what can happen. There is no greater disaster that ever befell humanity than the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. How in the world can we ever recover from killing God?

How did we reach that point? The disaster of Holy Week shows us. But in the midst of all that disaster, Jesus kept focus on where we were headed. And he showed us how to navigate through it. Yes, he gave himself space to cry out to God and ask for something different. He acknowledged and modeled for us the need to grieve, and the need to cry out for justice and mercy. He felt the impact of corrupt and dysfunctional systems, systems caught off guard by the crisis before them. He knew the impact of those like Pilate who chose to take minimal interest and responsibility for the situation before them, those with short attention spans who wanted to just move on to the next thing. And Jesus knew that even in the chaos, it was still important to notice the important moments around them, like Passover. It was important to gather around a table with friends and family and try to catch breath. It was important to confide in those closest to him about his fears and worries, like he did with the disciples in the garden. And, it was still important to pay attention to others around him who were suffering and offer them relief, like he did for the thief on the cross. And it was important, even at the height of his own suffering and on the verge of death, to offer grace and forgiveness to those who had acted out of fear, selfishness, greed, power, and ignorance.

Jesus gives us a model that not only recognizes and allows for our humanness, but also helps us stay focused beyond the immediate pain we are in to see what is still yet to come. He knows that this will not be

the end of the story. He knows there are still better days to come.

He knows Easter is on its way. And all of this disaster will be completely mitigated. Death will have no sting anymore. Disaster will never be permanent again.

So, my friends, may that be our prayer and our focus when we go through our own disasters, be they personal, natural, or spiritual. It is never the last word, the last moment, the last chance. Because there is an empty tomb, there is no final end. We have the capacity and the divine promise of full recovery. That is the promise of Easter. That is the promise of a life lived in Jesus Christ.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. How does Holy Week change for you if you think of it in terms of a disaster?
2. Which natural disaster seems to best represent Holy Week for you and why?
3. We are accustomed to identifying God in the story of Holy Week, to see God at work even in the midst of the most horrifying circumstances. How can that understanding help us in the midst of disaster?
4. Using Jesus as our model, how might that change how we confront life's disasters? Or how has it helped us in the past when we have done that?

5. The video for this week is mostly people sharing their stories of the night of the tornadoes. The purpose of this last lesson is to help us experience Holy Week as a violent storm. As you listen to their stories, what details or images help you imagine the disaster of Holy Week in a new way? And where do you hear the hope of resurrection echoed in their stories?