



The news from Houston and the surrounding areas that have been devastated by Hurricane Harvey has been so very sad. Experts are saying it may well have been the most destructive storm in the history of the United States, leaving people dead, wounded, and with the loss of everything they have owned. We admire the courageous talk of *We are Texans*, but we have to be deeply troubled with the long-lasting physical, psychological, spiritual and financial cost to those impacted. We have seen moments of great generosity where ordinary people have put their own lives at risk to help others, and we have seen the worst of human nature with a few people looting and others price gouging. Perhaps, you are like me and are tempted to turn off the television or not read the papers since it is so depressing.

Immediately, some people blame global warming. I am not intelligent enough to know if global warming is the cause or not, but I do know that hurricanes and other natural disasters have been occurring since the dawn of time. We also may notice a few politicians of both political parties, and their supporters who seek to find a way to put some blame, if not on the storm itself, on either the preparation or recovery efforts of their political foes. We know this hurricane has brought great havoc to rich and poor, black and white, Democrat and Republican, and so finger pointer at such a time seems abhorrent to most ordinary people. Just help us is the cry of the victims!

I have noticed that the words *a storm of Biblical proportion* has been used. I suppose the use of this term as an adjective is fair. Such an overwhelming force of nature recalls the story of Noah and the ark. Yet, sad to say, I have read a few, and thank God it is only a few, who see Hurricane Harvey as a form of God's punishment on the people for their sins. These few preachers are hard-lined fundamentalists who see God as a punishing angry figure in the sky. No parent would ever wish such suffering on a child and why would anyone think that God is about sending pain and suffering to his people? One cannot read the four *Gospels* without seeing that Jesus, the Son of God, reveals the Father as a God of mercy and compassion, who welcomes home the lost son with a festive banquet rather than a harsh punishment.

However, it is only natural and human for you and me to wonder why God has created a world, granted a world that is full of beauty and wonder, but also a world that has hurricanes, tornadoes, cancer and heart attacks. We cannot help but wonder and join with Job in asking the question *Why*. Why pain and suffering in the world if God is good and loving?

This is the most difficult of all spiritual questions to ponder. I would not dare to suggest that one can ever completely grasp why there is suffering in the world, but to be person of faith, we need to make our peace with such a haunting reality. I know many good and sincere people who cannot believe in God since they cannot accept the mystery of suffering in the world. Even one of our greatest saints, Therese of Lisieux battled doubt and questions in her own life over such issues.

For me, life comes down to two choices: either there is a God or there is not. If there is not a God, then we are all just a bunch of atomic particles bouncing around with no meaning or value. The non-believer points to the pain of the world and says how can there be a God. The believer points to the goodness of people, the glory of the heavens and earth, to wonder of his or her own life, and sees that there must be a God. The very impulse that you, along with so many Americans of every nationality and religion, along people all over the world, feel compelled to do something: it seems like every organization in America is setting up relief funds. Our own Bishop Barres immediately called for a collection in support of the victims. Where does this impulse to do good, to help those who are hurting, to reach out to them in support, come from? Why are you and I nudged in our hearts to help? I believe that is the grace of God. Whether they are religious people or not, those who are helping the suffering people of Texas are the hands of a God revealed to us in Jesus, who are touching the world with his love.

Last week, in the Gospels, Jesus asks Peter, *who do you say I am*. Peter, says *you are the Messiah, the Christ, the Son of God*. Jesus praises Peter for his response. *"Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah. For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my heavenly Father.* In our Gospel today, we hear, Jesus is beginning to prepare his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer greatly from the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed and on the third day be raised. Peter cannot image the Messiah dying a cruel death. Jesus, gives Peter a very harsh rebuke: *Get behind me Satan. You are thinking not as God does, but as human beings do."*

*We are not thinking as God does but as human beings do.* The Son of God, born as an infant in stable, rejected by many, the washer of feet and the scandalous forgiver of sins, a man condemned to death, and nailed to a cross is not a God that Peter can understand. Traditionally, we believe suffering entered the world through the fall of Adam and Eve. The sin of Adam and Eve is that they want to be more than human. Satan tells them if you eat the fruit of the forbidden tree, you will be like God. This sin of pride continues in humanity. We can think we know more than God.

God does not cause hurricanes. Why evil and suffering is in the world has no textbook answer that satisfies our questions. What gives me consolation and faith is that God reveals himself as one who is with us amid suffering. If God can be found dying on cross on a hill in Jerusalem, he is certainly present to us in the midst flooding water. He is present to the person dying of cancer or struggling with the darkness of depression. His name is Emmanuel which means God with us. Jesus has entered fully into the pain of the world.

The poet Rainer Marie Rilke wrote this to a young man who was struggling with questions about the meaning of life: *“Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer.”*