

Hurricane Harvey Overwhelms Authorities; Civilians Pitch in to Help Those at Risk

Hurricane Harvey, which recently slammed Houston and southeastern Texas, stalled over the city for days pelting residents relentlessly. By the time the storm subsides, meteorologists predict it will have dumped 15-20 trillion gallons of water over the region. Rivers overflowed and levees were breached as rainfall reached historic levels - over 50 inches.

Thousands of people have fled to shelters with little more than the clothes on their backs. Food, water, medicine and access to sanitation are all in short supply. Property damage is estimated to be in the billions. Nearly half a million people are expected to request disaster recovery assistance as the flood waters recede.

Texas Gov. Greg Abbott declared a state of emergency in some 50 counties and mobilized all 14,000 members of the Texas National Guard, Air National Guard and State Guard. Another 10,000 were activated from other states. He characterized the response of leaders along the Texas coast to the hurricane as "unparalleled... immeasurable, courageous, and heroic."

Sgt. Steve Perez, who had been with the Houston Police Department for 34 years, drowned when his patrol car became trapped in high waters as he tried to get to work. Before he left his home, his wife had asked him not to go, but he responded, "We've got work to do."

Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) deployed 8,500 employees to assist local and state officials and first responders with search and rescue, damage assessment and the long recovery effort still ahead. The U.S. Coast Guard utilized boats and helicopters in hazardous conditions to rescue those in peril.

The magnitude of the disaster has overwhelmed the professionals on the front lines, prompting officials to urge neighbors to help neighbors in any way they could. Thousands of people have been rescued, many by residents using their own boats in what some have called a "civilian," "Cajun" or "redneck" navy.

Some of the volunteers responded to the obvious needs surrounding them without direct oversight of a governmental agency, some developed their own strategy by connecting with other volunteers on social media, and some placed themselves at the disposal of government authorities who were in a

position to coordinate their efforts. All were motivated by the common goal of saving lives.

Jordy Bloodsworth is one of those who headed to Houston from Baton Rouge, Louisiana, towing his 18-foot fishing boat behind his car, loaded with supplies. Bloodsworth, 25, said he empathized with Texans because he lost everything when Hurricane Katrina hit his hometown a dozen years ago.

Crickett Erwin of Sugar Land, Texas, said she and her went out on jet skis to rescue mothers with children because she has children of her own. "If I have the opportunity to have jet skis, to be able to go in there and bring 'em back: ... It makes you feel good that you can help somebody like that," she said.

"Our lives are not determined by the ways in which we are challenged, but by the way we respond to the challenges we face," Abbott said. "There are so many heroes in Houston who literally saved the lives of their fellow Texans."

Some observers noted that in the throes of a catastrophic, apocalyptic natural disaster, no one seemed to care what race, religion, political party or other distinction marked a rescuer or a person in need of rescue. What mattered was human beings helping other human beings. As Long put it, "We're a unified effort. We're a team. We all depend on each other."

What can Hurricane Harvey teach us about faith, fear, and working together to lift each other out of the murky depths?

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

Psalm 69:13-15

But as for me, my prayer is to you, O LORD.

At an acceptable time, O God,

in the abundance of your steadfast love, answer me.

With your faithful help rescue me

from sinking in the mire;

let me be delivered from my enemies

and from the deep waters.

Do not let the flood sweep over me,

or the deep swallow me up,

or the Pit close its mouth over me. (For context, read. 69:1-3, 9-16.)

"Truly this storm has brought all of us to our knees, and our only recourse is to join King David in his plea for mercy: 'Save me, O God, for the waters have

risen up to my neck' (Psalm 69:1)," wrote The Rt. Rev. C. Andrew Doyle, Episcopal Bishop of Texas in '[Hurricane Harvey and Our Mission](#)'.

David uses the metaphor of deep waters to describe the emotional trauma he was experiencing due to the persecution of his enemies. We can be encouraged by David's ability to speak honestly to God about his feelings.

Yet even in his anguish, David remembers that "the steadfast love of God is good" (69:16), pledging to praise God with thanksgiving (69:30). It's easy to praise God when everything is going well; it is in the time of trouble when praise becomes a sacrifice (Hebrews 13:15), that may well be difficult to offer to God,

That message is reiterated in Isaiah 43:2-3: "When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; ... For I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior. ..."

Questions: Have you ever experienced a physical or emotional flood that made you feel like you were in danger of drowning? If you prayed, what did you say to God? Does trauma make it easier or harder to be honest with God?

Matthew 8:23-27

And when he got into the boat, his disciples followed him. A windstorm arose on the sea, so great that the boat was being swamped by the waves; but he was asleep. And they went and woke him up, saying, "Lord, save us! We are perishing!" And he said to them, "Why are you afraid, you of little faith?" Then he got up and rebuked the winds and the sea; and there was a dead calm. They were amazed, saying, "What sort of man is this, that even the winds and the sea obey him?" (For context, read 8:23-34.)

"Two of the most powerful images in Scripture have Jesus Christ exercising authority over the sea," wrote Bishop Doyle in his letter. One is this text, and the other is Matthew 14:26, where Jesus walks on the sea.

"The point being made by the biblical author is clear: namely, that God's power to save, renew, heal, and restore is infinitely greater than the sea's power to destroy," Doyle continued. "The God we know in Jesus Christ forever sits 'enthroned amidst the flood' (Psalm 29:10)."

Questions: Who do you know who is feeling afraid these days? What does the gospel message have to say to such a person? How can faith vanquish our fear? What is our role in helping one another to hold onto such faith?

Luke 10:36-37

"Which of these three, do you think, proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?" He said, "The one who showed him mercy." And Jesus said to him, "You go, and do likewise." (For context, read 10:25-37.)

In English and in the Greek, the word "neighbor" means someone who lives or is nearby (a "near-dweller"). In the same manner as the word "brothers," its meaning is extended to those who have a kinship of some kind -- be it of blood relationship, tribe, belief or other association -- and not merely to those who dwell nearby.

Jesus reminds us that anyone we meet who is in need is a "near-dweller" at that time, and that we are to react accordingly. Nearby is also relative: In some cases, like with the flood-water volunteer rescuers, "nearby" may be several hundred miles.

Questions: When have you had the opportunity to unexpectedly give to or receive from a "neighbor"? How can a crisis change how you view who is your neighbor?

Prayer for Cities (BCP p.825)

Heavenly Father, in your Word you have given us a vision of that holy City to which the nations of the world bring their glory: Behold and visit, we pray, the cities of the earth, especially Houston, Texas.

Renew the ties of mutual regard which form our civic life.
Send us honest and able leaders. Enable us to eliminate poverty, prejudice, and oppression, that peace may prevail with righteousness, and justice with order, and that men and women from different cultures and with differing talents may find with one another the fulfillment of their humanity; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*