

Sermon

August 26 and 27, 2006

John 6:56-69

When things get rough,  
when life is hard,  
when following Jesus is difficult,  
how do we respond?

I pray that we might respond with Peter,  
when following Jesus was tough,  
when disciples were deserting him.

Peter said:

“Lord, to whom can we go?  
You have the words of eternal life.”

It surprised me  
that it's already been a year since Katrina.  
That's not an event  
I associate with a date,  
like September 11.  
So, it wasn't until I started hearing news reports  
that I realized it has been a year already.

I looked back at my notes  
about Katrina,  
part of a sermon a year ago.  
I wrote.

I remember when I first heard about Katrina.  
It wasn't even a hurricane at that point.  
The weatherman made some comment  
about this being a storm  
we really didn't need to worry about.  
And for a while,  
that's how it looked.

But then Monday morning,

August 29,  
having already crossed southern Florida,  
and then picked up energy in the gulf,  
Katrina slammed into the gulf coast.

As I read the paper  
and watched the reports,  
it still seemed like  
it was a glancing blow on New Orleans.  
I remember reading that 5 had been killed—  
—2 or 3 of them in a car accident  
as they left the storm area.  
And the death of 5 is tragic.

But it moved from that,  
to an immense tragedy.  
With many more than originally thought  
dying in the carnage of the storm in Biloxi  
and along the Gulf Coast.

To the levees breaking in New Orleans,  
and over 80% of the city being flooded.  
Over 1000 dead  
And for those who lived,  
lives changed forever.

A year later,  
cleanup continues,  
with a long, long way to go.

Where is God in the midst of this?  
I remember reading Psalm 46  
during the Thursday evening prayer service  
we had for victims of Katrina.

**God is our refuge and strength,  
a very present help in trouble.**

**The Lord of hosts is with us;  
the God of Jacob is our stronghold.**

Even in the midst of the worst we can imagine.

Whether caused by hurricanes  
or tsunamis  
or earthquakes  
or tornadoes.  
Or terrorism.  
Or war.  
Or sickness.  
Or grief.

In the midst of the worst we can imagine,  
God is with us.

One of the ways God is with us  
is in our response to disaster.  
I am so pleased with the way this congregation  
has become the arms and legs of Christ  
for the victims of Katrina.  
With you giving tens of thousands of dollars to help—  
—and that's just what we know about.  
With the youth going down to Alabama to work.  
With a group going in about a month  
to work with Habitat somewhere around New Orleans.  
And you can still be a part of that.  
With your thoughts and your prayers.  
With persistent care.  
Even a year later.

**God is our refuge and strength.  
A very present help in trouble.**

And God is so much with us  
in and pain and sin of the world,  
that God became human—  
—Jesus.  
And living among us.  
And laughed and loved among us.  
And taught among us.  
And suffered among us.  
And died for us.

Suffering the worst we can imagine,  
or maybe more.

And in that suffering and death,  
it became clear  
that no power was too great for God.  
No pain too great for God to overcome.  
No tragedy too great for God.  
Nothing beyond the scope of God's power and love.

And that love is for you and for me here today.  
And that love is for all those  
who continue to struggle in the midst of Katrina's destruction.  
God's love is always with them.  
Nothing can separate them  
or us  
from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

**Lord, to whom shall we go?**  
**You have the words of eternal life.**

But this Bible passage,  
this event with Peter and Jesus,  
doesn't just speak to the struggles outside us.  
It is talking very much  
about the struggles inside us.

Actually,  
going back to the Joshua passage,  
Joshua and Jesus both ask you today:  
How will you respond?

We hear the call first from Joshua.  
Joshua was near the end of his life.  
He was an old man.  
And Joshua called all the tribes of Israel together at Shechem.

The people were surrounded by other gods—  
—the gods of the Egyptians  
—the gods of the Amorites  
—gods of their ancestors from far-off lands.

And the people had a choice to make:

Who would they serve?  
Who would they follow?  
Who would be their God?

And Joshua put the question before them:

“God has protected you and your ancestors through all sorts of troubles.  
God is with you always.  
Now, who are you going to serve?  
As for me and my house,  
we will serve the Lord.”

We, too, are surrounded by other gods.

Who will you serve?  
–the god of money  
–the god of popularity  
–the god of power  
–of control  
–success  
–comfort?

God has always been with you  
and will always be with you.

God has called you.  
Who will you serve?

It is my prayer

that we will say again and again each day with Joshua:  
“As for me and my house,  
we will serve the Lord.”

And it's my prayer

that when times get rough,  
and we're tempted to walk away from our Lord and Savior,  
that we will say with Simon Peter:  
“Lord, to whom can we go?

You have the words of eternal life.”

People do walk away from Jesus  
when it gets hard to follow.  
That’s what we read about in our Gospel lesson today.

Over the last several weeks,  
the Gospel readings  
have been from the 6<sup>th</sup> chapter of John.  
Talking about “bread of life”.

As the chapter began,  
big crowds followed Jesus.  
Jesus was healing the sick,  
taking care of them.  
Then they got really excited  
when he fed a whole crowd with 5 barley loaves and 2 fish.  
They wanted to make this guy king.

But then,  
Jesus started talking about bread.  
They liked it better when he was just feeding them bread.  
He called himself the bread of life,  
the bread which came down from heaven.  
Jesus said that the bread which he would give  
for the life of the world is his flesh.  
And if we ate that flesh,  
we would live forever.

And we read:  
**“When many of Jesus’ disciples heard his teaching,  
they said,  
‘This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?’”**

What happened when the words were hard to hear?  
What happened when it became more challenging  
and less comfortable to follow Jesus?  
A whole lot of them took off.  
They left Jesus.

They went home.

Jesus didn't change his message.

He didn't say:

“Sorry, I didn't mean to make it so tough.  
Come on back,  
we'll make it easy on you.”

That's not what he did.

He laid it on the line.

It's not always easy following Jesus.  
It's not always easy to believe.

But Jesus turned to his 12,

his closest followers,  
and he said to them.

What about you?

Do you also wish to go away?

You hear the voice of Jesus.

What do you say?

When times are rough.

When things aren't going as you hoped.

When following Jesus

is causing struggle in your family,

or your work,

or your school,

or your neighborhood.

What do you say?

May you respond with Simon Peter,

day after day after day,

as Jesus calls you daily to follow.

When Jesus says,

“Do you also wish to go away?”

May you say,

**“Lord, to whom can we go?  
You have the words of eternal life.  
We have come to believe and to know  
that you are the Holy One of God.”**

The very first Sunday  
I was at Good Shepherd,  
August 25, 1991,  
I preached on this text.

I used an illustration  
about Pompeii,  
the Roman city  
buried by the volcano Vesuvius in 79 AD.  
For about 1600 years,  
the ruins remained buried.  
And then it was accidentally discovered,  
and archeological excavation began.

When Pompeii was being excavated,  
they found a body.  
This woman’s body had been preserved  
by the ashes from Mount Vesuvius—  
—as it swept over the city.  
This woman’s feet were turned toward the city gate,  
toward safety,  
but her face was turned backward.  
She was looking toward something  
that was just beyond her outstretched hands.

The archeologists wondered what she was looking for.  
And as they dug,  
they found a bag of pearls.  
She was reaching for a bag of pearls.

Maybe she dropped them as she ran for her life.  
Maybe someone else dropped them,

and this lady saw the chance for instant wealth.  
But, one way or another,  
with her life on the line,  
she thought it was worthwhile to stop  
and pick up some pearls.  
She turned to pick them up  
and the volcanic ash swept over her.

What's really important?  
The gods of power  
and money  
and comfort  
surround us.

And we're tempted to give our lives  
to them.

But Joshua asks says to you and to me,  
"Choose today who you will serve."  
I pray that you may say with Joshua,  
"As for me and my house,  
we will serve the Lord."

And when Jesus says to you,  
"Do you also wish to go away?"  
May you say with Peter,  
"Lord, to whom can we go?  
You have the words of eternal life."

In Jesus' name,  
Amen