

WGUMC September 8, 2019 “Tracking a Hurricane”  
Deuteronomy 30:15-20 and Luke 14:25-33

“Look to your right. Look to your left. Only one of you will be here by the end of the course.” How many of you remember hearing that from an engineering or organic chemistry professor back in the day? We called them “weed out” courses, designed to thin the crowd and discourage the less-than-totally committed.

I wonder if that’s what Jesus is doing in the Gospel of Luke this morning. He’s being followed by a large crowd that is agog with this religious rockstar who has been teaching and healing all around Galilee. But unlike some celebrities, Jesus doesn’t care about the size of the crowd. He cares about the depth of the commitment. Following Jesus involves a lot more than being eager to stand in line to see him live in concert. So he gives them what amounts to a look-to-the-right-look-to-the-left speech to warn them about the cost of discipleship.

Jesus asks his followers to imagine that they are building a tower. The first thing you have to do is estimate the cost of the

materials and labor and allow for some overrun. You might remember that our Trustees made a plan to replace the lift over two years ago. They made a good plan. They had a good estimate, but they had no way of knowing then all the difficulties and delays they were going to run into. As you know, the lift is still unfinished, and like Jesus said, we're all a little embarrassed. Ask David Forderer: frustration is one of the costs of following Jesus.

But it isn't the only one. Jesus is pretty blunt about what it's going to cost to follow him. We have to be willing to give up everything—our families, our possessions, livelihoods, even our lives. But even if we put all of those costs into our plan, there is no way to predict what that is going to mean.

I remember when I was preparing for ministry, and I had to write an essay about what I was going to have to give up to be a pastor. I was 23 years old at the time. I didn't have anything, so I wasn't all that concerned about having to give up something.

Sometimes it's better that you don't know what you're getting into. It was only later that I learned the true costs of that commitment.

The same is true for everyone, not just clergy. The fact is that following Jesus and loving where he wants us to love and living the way he wants us to live involves sacrifices that can't be known beforehand and costs that can't be foreseen. Planning your life is not so different from trying to track a hurricane.

Like you, I've had hurricanes on my mind all week. My first field assignment in seminary was on Ocracoke Island, one of the Outer Banks Islands off the coast of North Carolina. Ocracoke is shaped like a tadpole. It's a tiny strip of land that separates Pamlico Sound from the Atlantic Ocean, and it's a mile wide at its widest point. This week it was walloped by Dorian. In fact, it has been in the path of several hurricanes in the last few years. You might wonder why anyone would want to live in hurricane country. Probably for the same reason that people live in earthquake or wildfire country.

While we are a long way from Hurricane Alley, a lot of us feel as though we live in hurricane central. Of course, politics has always been something of a hurricane. It's just that lately we've gone from Category 2 to 5 and the sustained winds are beginning to wear us all down. Add to that the social media hurricane that hits us with misinformation and madness all day, every day. There is hurricane force hate battering our country and hitting especially hard on our southern border.

That's not all. Here on the local scene, we have a lack-of-affordable-housing hurricane that is flinging more and more people farther and farther away from their jobs. That spawns a traffic tornado when those folks have to drive in from Modesto or Tracy or Los Banos to get to work. Meanwhile, each of us has our own personal hurricane of people and problems swirling around us, making demands on our time, our money, our energy, our sanity. For some of us, there is a hurricane of health crises that are gathering strength offshore. Because we are stuck in our bodies, we can't

easily evacuate. And that makes us nervous because we don't know when any of it is going to make landfall. There you have it: Life is a hurricane, and sometimes we just want to go down into the storm cellar and not come out until it all blows over.

If you watch the weather, you know that tracking a hurricane is an exercise in probabilities. There are so many variables—water temperature, air pressure, wind speed, geography—which means that spaghetti charts and cones of uncertainty can't tell us what the hurricane is going to do or when and where it's going to do it. You get a slightly different story on different channels. And it's awfully hard to know whom we can trust to tell us what we should do.

Life is like that, too. In ancient Rome, people were told to trust the father of the family because the father was like a stand-in for the emperor who was like a god. But Jesus said, "No. Don't follow them. Follow me. You are going to get caught in many storms in your lives, and you aren't going to be able to count on your father or any of your family always being there. And I can assure you that

the emperor won't be there. When the going gets tough, you won't be able to rely on having a job or a house or lots of possessions, either. For when the wind howls and the water rises, no amount of stuff is going to make you safe. On the contrary, your stuff will just be swirling in the water around you, making you all the more unsafe."

Jesus, on the other hand, is the Lord of the wind and the waves. Remember the story about the disciples in the boat. A storm came up as Jesus was napping. When the boat was about to capsize, "Jesus woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, 'Peace! Be still!' Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm."

[Mark 4:39]

The question that came to my mind this week about this story is, "Did Jesus really stop the storm or did he lead the disciples into the center of it where everything is still? You've heard about the eye of a hurricane, that space in the center of the storm where the wind and water are strangely calm. Chaos and destruction are still

going on all around, but in the center the pressure goes way down and there is peace. In light of the hurricane this week, I hear Jesus saying, “You can’t escape all the storms in your life. You’re just going to have to live through them. So get in my boat. We’re not going to evade or evacuate. I am going to take you right into the center of this storm. You will be safe there with me. We’ll ride it out together.”

That story in Mark about the boat in the storm was the theme of Annual Conference in Modesto this summer, because what’s happening in the United Methodist Church right now feels like a hurricane. We just may blow apart come General Conference next year. But even if that storm doesn’t affect us much one way or another, there are winds of change blowing right here, too.

It is too true that we spend a lot of our resources keeping these old buildings from blowing over. But it is the changing winds of our culture that are really going to shape our future. That’s why we have to sit down and recalibrate the cost of being a disciple of Jesus

Christ in Silicon Valley. Our Vision Team and the four-church conversation called “Isaiah 43:19” can tell us that this is hard to do when you are in the midst of a hurricane. Like when I started out in ministry 30 years ago, none of us really knows what we are going to have to give up and how much we are going to let go. But Jesus promises us this: “Lose *your* life and I’ll give you *mine*.”

I imagine that we’ll be counting the cost of Hurricane Dorian for a long time. But the one figure I will remember is not a number. It is a person named Brent Lowe who used to live on the island of Abaco. You may have heard about him. Brent has diabetes. It has taken his eyesight and damaged his kidneys. But that didn’t stop him from picking up his 24-year-old son who has cerebral palsy and wading through chin-high water. Without being able to see, Brent held onto his neighbors and felt his way to safety.

When I heard that story, I thought, the blind man is *us*. Like him, we need help. We can’t see where we are going, but we can carry each other and be Jesus for one another through this and all



the storms of life. Holding onto each other, we can feel our way to the calm center of the storm where Christ is, where peace is.

That, my friends, is both the cost and the crown of discipleship. So don't be afraid. When the hurricane hit, Brent and his family huddled in the bathroom praying. The storm set before them a choice between leaving and staying, between a chance for life and the real possibility of death. And while their praying did not stop the storm from blowing the roof off of their house, it did give them the courage to choose life.

Following Jesus means choosing life every day, no matter the cost, no matter the weather, and it's so much easier and better when we make that choice together. So look to your left, look to your right. I assure you that you will all finish the course. It will be a group effort with a group grade. But by God's grace, you will fight the good fight, finish the race, and keep the faith. [2 Timothy 4:7]

Thanks be to God.

