



With You Always

Sermon for ADRA Canada's Disaster and Famine Relief Offering on May 11, 2019.

The eye of a hurricane is a terrifying place to be. It is eerily quiet and still. Its peace is ominous, rather than comforting, because you know that the worst is yet to come. Soon, the eye wall, the most destructive part of the storm, will be upon you.

Church, today we are sitting in the eye of the hurricane. Worshiping freely together in our peaceful country testifies to that fact. But this peace we are in is only temporary. Scripture tells us that the storm will return.

But we do not need to be afraid. Today as we consider those affected by natural and manmade disasters around the world, let us also remember the God who is among it all. The God who weeps for each person injured and lost. The God whose heart breaks for the world He made in perfection. And the God who compels us to walk hand in hand with Him to mend the people and places left broken in the wake of these disasters.

I say again that we do not need to be afraid, because whether we're in the eye of the storm or already facing its fury, He is already there.

In 2018, there were 77 disasters of global significance. In September, a 7.5 earthquake struck the coastline of Indonesia. Its powerful shakes caused the soil to behave like liquid, sending tidal waves of mud through villages, leaving death and destruction in its wake.

Fleeing systemic persecution and violence, over one million Rohingya prefer living in refugee camps with inadequate resources and infrastructure to facing the dangers of remaining at home.

As their country implodes politically and inflation soars to 10 million percent, 3.5 million Venezuelans seek stability and opportunity in neighbouring countries. Economic refugees, their story is not as well-known as that of refugees of conflict. Yet their circumstances are similar. For those unable to leave their country, life is unimaginably difficult.

To these large-scale disasters add localized emergencies that never made the news outside their country.

Quite literally, not a day has passed without people in crisis.

Whether large-scale or small, sudden or protracted, a disaster creates crisis. The most critical needs are always food, water, and shelter – the very things that allow life to go on. Then comes rebuilding one's life to restore a sense of normality.

But disasters don't just create crises – they also create questions. Ask anyone who has been affected by a disaster, and they'll share a long list of questions that flood their minds, at times obsessively: What will we eat? Where will we go? What do we do next?

They are all very physical questions – practical necessities that must be answered.

But there's also the philosophical questions, and for us as a community of faith, theological questions too. These questions arise even for those not affected by the disaster, perhaps separated by many thousands of miles. Questions such as: Where was God? Why didn't He do something? What does this say about who God is? Why me? Why them again?

The physical and the theological seem completely separate, unaffected by each other. However, I'd like to suggest that these two



dimensions should be merged into one essential question for all Christians: How do we respond?

Psalm 66 gives us a wise example of how to respond to crises. Let's turn there now. Some believe that this anonymous psalm was written after King Hezekiah's deliverance from a time of national distress. Psalm 66 is a song of praise, not for a tragedy averted, but for the unseen work of God during a crisis. It illustrates the dependency of humans on the greatness of God during times of trouble.

While no single sermon can address all the difficult issues presented by a disaster, this text offers some useful advice for responding to crises:

- 1) Seek understanding: "Come and see the works of God." (Psalm 66:5, NKJV) Disasters, like sicknesses and accidents, leave us with a host of valid questions about morality and the nature of God. The debate about God's role in physical disasters predates even the incarnation of Christ – remember Job? Unfortunately, people tend to rush to judgment on these issues and often come to erroneous conclusions.

The psalmist calls us to “see the works of God” despite the calamity. To stop and breathe for a moment, to open our eyes to God’s activity. This doesn’t come naturally to us. Instead, we usually rush into some of these responses:

- The atheist's response

Oxford University Professor Richard Dawkins explains, "Human life is nothing more than a way for selfish genes to multiply and reproduce." The atheist's response to disasters is simply, "It's just nature — too bad."

- Then there's philosopher's response

When observing catastrophic death and destruction, the philosopher suggests, "If God is God, He is not good. If God is good, He is not God." The philosopher believes: "God can be good, or He can be powerful, but He cannot be both." Christians ought to reject this outright. We should



understand that God is both full of mercy (Psalm 66:20) and, as James 1:13 points out, unable to be "tempted by evil."

- There's also the legalist's response

The legalist explains all suffering as a consequence of individual sin. Granted, some suffering is a result of moral failure. But we must be careful to not assign all suffering to individual sin. This was the response of the Pharisees in John 9 to the blind man. We should remember that natural disasters touch "the just and the unjust" alike. It's a part of living in a fallen world.

The Christian's response is the one that doesn't come naturally, at least to most of us. It's very tempting to believe that "that's just the way it is," or "God is an angry God," or "those people deserve what they got."

In contrast, the Christian trusts the wisdom and sovereignty of God without making Him the author of sin, chaos, and destruction. In response to a crisis, our own or someone else's, we must take the time to observe and understand the work of God and His character revealed in it. As disciples of Jesus, let us not rush to the hasty conclusions of the world – but instead let our understanding be illuminated by the words of Scripture.

- 2) The second response encouraged in Psalm 66 is to place our trust in God: "He keeps us alive." (Psalm 66:9, CSB) We trust God, because we know God.

Yet in the face of hardship, as we wait in the eye of the hurricane, simultaneously taking stock of the damage and preparing for what is to come, trust is not always easy. If this is you today, do not let your trust wane. Throughout history the people of God have placed their hands in His hands. When the psalmist writes that "He keeps us alive," this is a reflection not on the action of God, but on His very character.

Let us remember:

- God is unchanging (James 1:17). God is not like us – He does not change between good and evil in His actions, thoughts, or intentions.



Justice
Compassion
Love

- God is good, merciful, gracious, and compassionate. Nothing pains God more than human suffering. Our current condition is not what He designed, but rather a result of sin entering the world. Among it all, God remains good, merciful, gracious, and compassionate.

- God is sovereign in the universe. While a battle rages on earth, we can take heart that the war has already been won. Our Creator God is all-powerful and sovereign on earth and in the universe. Though we may not understand the why's and wherefore's of events, we can trust that God does and that He is working all things together for our good.

3) The third response modeled in Psalm 66 is to pray for those in need: "I cried out to Him with my mouth." (Psalm 66:17, CSB)

Facing a calamity, the psalmist cried to God. His words indicate a sense of urgency and desperation. And true to His Word, "God has listened" and shown mercy (Psalm 66:19).

So it is with us. When disaster strikes, wherever it may be around the world, we should pray for God's grace and mercy. Because we are a people of faith, our prayers have the potential to impact many people:

- Those who are personally affected.
- Those who are grieving over the loss of life and livelihood.
- Those who fear and worry about what to do or where to turn.
- Those who question and wonder what is happening.
- Those who lead the recovery efforts.
- Those who help the hurting.

Church, it would be easy to stop there, wouldn't it – with the call to trust God and pray. But easy isn't always enough, is it? Undoubtedly, prayer has the power to change things – but prayer is at its most powerful when we allow it to change us.



And so, as we consider those afflicted by disasters around the world, the words of James 2:14-18 (NIV) echo in my ears:

“What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them? Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace; keep warm and well fed,’ but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead. “But someone will say, ‘You have faith; I have deeds.’ “Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by my deeds.”

Friends, we must not shy away from this broken world. We must pray for how God would have us step into it as “the hands and feet of Jesus” to bring hope, healing, and restoration. As Christians, our response must include serving like Jesus did and making God’s love known, not only by our words but in our actions.

Remember the words of 1 John 3:16-18 (NIV): “This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters. If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person? Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth.”

Our church’s ministry through ADRA is one way in which we can show God’s love. After the devastation of the Indonesian earthquake consumed their property and their livelihood, Ilham and his family moved to a survivor’s camp. With nothing but each other and the clothes on their backs, they hardly knew where to start. ADRA was there to offer them a shelter kit.

With a roof over their heads again and the comfort of knowing where they could rest and be at peace, they were better able to tackle the myriad challenges facing them. One pressing, daily challenge was preventing the contraction of virulent diseases that stalk the survivors of natural disasters due to contaminated water. ADRA provided them with a



hygiene kit and training on how to protect themselves. When Ilham and his family most needed it, our ADRA ministry was able to show them a sign of God's love and presence with them by meeting some of their most pressing needs.

Faruk, a 12 year old Rohingya boy, was in school when the soldiers came to his remote village. Watching from the window, he and his friends saw the soldiers shooting people at random. Terrified that the soldiers would come to the school, the children ran out the back door and fled to another village. Once it was safe to come back, they crept home, anxious to learn about their families.

Faruk was relieved to find that his family was safe. Knowing it was not safe to remain, Faruk's family decided to join the stream of many others making their way to Bangladesh.

After travelling for 18 days they arrived in Bangladesh. Faruk and his family received a shelter kit from ADRA. They were grateful to have a temporary place to call home. ADRA had opened a Child Friendly Space, a place for children to gather, learn, and play together. Faruk has enjoyed going because it has helped him to make new friends, it gives him a safe place to play in a chaotic, unsanitary environment, and he is continuing to learn.

When Faruk's family needed a safe refuge, our ADRA ministry was there to share God's comfort and protection in a tangible way. When Faruk and other children like him needed a safe place to simply be children, our ADRA ministry was there to show God's delight in and concern over "the little ones."

As Seventh-day Adventists, we have been given a unique perspective on our times and our future. The groaning of the world and the calamities that come to pass should not be a surprise to us.

Today, church, we must be alert but not alarmed – alert to the goings-on, but also to the presence of God through it all. Since God is with us, we need not be alarmed.



As the psalmist writes in Psalm 46:1-3 (NIV): “God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble. Therefore, we will not fear, though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam and the mountains quake with their surging.”

Or, as Jesus said Himself in John 16:33 (NET): “I have told you these things so that in me you may have peace. In the world you have trouble and suffering but have courage – I have conquered the world.”

Part of being alert is being prepared. We must be prepared to act, and in doing so, to make God known to those who are hurting. As we wait in the eye of whatever hurricane may be brewing in our lives, as we consider the needs of those affected by disasters around the world, let us be a people who respond by seeing God in all things, by praising a God we can trust, by praying diligently for those affected, and by acting in whatever way we can to heal a world broken by sin.

For when we do all these things, our Christian actions will show even those who don't share our faith that Jesus' words, recorded in Matthew 28:20 (NIV), are true: “Surely I am with you always.”

