

September 10, 2017 – Matthew 18:1-20

There's an old quote from none other than Mr Rogers, who once said that when he was a child and he saw scary things on the news, his mother would say to him, "Always look for the helpers. There's always someone who is trying to help." And that, as a result of that advice, he came to see that "the world is full of doctors and nurses, police and firemen, volunteers, neighbors and friends who are ready to jump in to help when things go wrong."

We've been seeing a lot of that recently, haven't we? The United States right now is full of scary things on the news. Floods and fires and earthquakes and hurricanes. As we speak, Hurricane Irma is making landfall in Florida. Packing winds of 140 mph and a storm surge 15 feet high.

If you're anything like Fred Rogers, you've also seen a lot of helpers too. Because there are lots and lots of doctors and nurses, police and firemen, volunteers, neighbors and friends who have jumped in while things are going wrong.

And yet, I don't know about you, but it's also still pretty frightening. Because, yes, there were lots of people saved during all these tragedies. But there were also lots of people killed. And injured. Lots of people who lost their homes and neighborhoods.

When we see natural disasters of this scale there's often a term we use that is both unnerving to me as a pastor, but also one that is, in a way, brutally honest: an act of God. It's unnerving to me because it's wrong. These are not acts of God. God does not indiscriminantly kill and destroy without warning.

Yes, the Old Testament does show us God's wrath against evil. But it also shows us his prophets and his Word. Who came to people and warned them of God's wrath. Gave them every opportunity to repent. The fact of the matter is that there have been floods and fires and earthquakes and hurricanes and all manner of natural disaster for the world's entire history. And only a tiny, tiny fraction represented actual acts of God.

But we still use the term. And we do so because that's honestly how we feel. We see something as big and random and powerful as a hurricane or forest fire or earthquake and our gut reaction is simply to say, "God, why are you doing this? Why are you letting this happen? You're the only thing bigger than these natural disasters. If you can't stop them, who can?"

It's a very helpless place to be. And, for a Christian, it's a very troubling place to be. The presence of God with his people has always been a distinctive feature of our faith. All the way back to when God walked with Adam and Eve in the cool of the day, and into the Old Testament with the Ark of the Covenant, surrounded by the glory of God in the Temple.

To feel abandoned by God. Forgotten by him. Rejected by him. It runs against everything we were created to be. And it's quite possibly the very worst feeling in the world.

Jesus doesn't directly address natural disasters in our Gospel lesson today. I'm not going to say that he does. But he does address this idea of being separated from God. That's really what this whole lesson is about. About the things that drive a wedge between us and God. And leave us feeling abandoned, forgotten, and rejected by him.

He talks about pride. Pride like the disciples had. That seeks only to be greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Pride that doesn't let us humble ourselves as children of our heavenly Father, but seeks only to take God's throne, like Satan himself tried to. Pride is something that separates us from God.

He talks about temptation. Temptation that comes from the world. And drags even the youngest among us into sin. And temptation that comes from within. For it is not our eyes, our hands, or our feet that cause us to sin. It is our heart that causes us to sin. That's where temptation comes from. And temptation separates us from God.

He talks about anger and division and bitterness. That finds its way even into the church. Causing brother to attack brother. And forces us to confront one another in the hope of repentance. But the steadfastness to even send someone out of our midst rather than let that sin fester within. We are called to gather in unity in Jesus' name. But division separates us from God.

There's a lot in this world that separates us from God. But they all basically fall under the single heading of "sin." Sin separates us from God. It's one of the ways you might define the word itself. Anything that separates us from God is sin.

And anything that leaves us feeling abandoned or forgotten or rejected by God is sin. Because that's the nature of the first commandment. We should fear, love, and trust God above all things. To look at God and say, "Why did you abandon me? Why have you forgotten me? Why have you rejected me?" Is to say, "I do not fear, love, and trust you above all things."

I fear this flood or fire or earthquake or hurricane more than you. I love my own selfish doubts more than you. I trust my own reason and strength more than you.

It's really no different than saying we fear, love, and trust our own pride, or the world's temptations, or my heart's desires, or my own bitterness more than God. In the end, they're all false gods. They all separate us from Him.

And yet, there was one person who felt abandoned, forgotten, and rejected by God who really was. He yelled it out at the top of his lungs. "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" And that gets at the heart of Jesus' parable in the midst of our lesson.

*"What do you think? If a man has a hundred sheep and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray? And if he finds it, truly, I say to you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray. So it is not the will of my Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish."*

We call these natural disasters "acts of God." But I know for a fact that isn't true. Because it's not God's will that anyone should perish. And he proved it in Jesus Christ. He proved that he himself would rather perish than see any one of us die eternally.

And he proved that there is zero possibility that God will leave you abandoned, forgotten, or rejected. Because he is the shepherd who will drop everything to find you when you go astray. When you are filled with pride. When you are overwhelmed by temptation. When you are consumed by bitterness. When you are crushed by despair.

When all the gods of this world draw you away from our Lord. He searches you out and finds you. He leaves heaven above to come down to this sad, sinful world. With no other thought on his mind than the joy it will give him to scoop you up into his arms. He doesn't think about the sin that led you astray. He doesn't think about the pain he will endure on the cross. He thinks only of finding his lost sheep and bringing you home.

Earlier I mentioned the quote from Mr. Rogers about looking for the helpers. Because they always made him feel better. It made him feel secure and safe and loved to know that there were people like that around him.

I gotta say, I don't really see that. Because sometimes the storm is too big. Sometimes the community doesn't help each other. Sometimes the rescuers don't get there in time.

And yet, I still see something really powerful in those images. Not the strength of sinful human beings and their often feeble love for each other. No, instead, I see little glimpses of what Jesus did for us.

When a rescue boat finds someone stranded on a rooftop or a firefighter works to protect a home from a burning forest or a neighbor pulls a friend from the rubble of a collapsed building. I see a shadow of the shepherd who left the ninety-nine to rescue the one. I see a reminder of the Lord who went to the cross not just to save a friend or neighbor. But to save a sinner like me. Like you. Like the whole world.

When it comes right down to it, we may cry out to God for a savior from floods, fires, earthquakes, and hurricanes. But what we get from him is even better. We get a savior from sin, death, and the devil. And that's the most powerful act of God we will ever see. Amen.