

Lectionary 22A 2017, Matt. 16:21-28, Rom. 12:9-21, September 3, 2017, Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Lancaster, PA, Kurt S. Strause

The stories of tremendous courage, amazing resourcefulness, and yet awful tragedy in the wake of Hurricane Harvey in Texas are just now beginning to be told. Because Harvey's path of destruction is so wide, and so extensive, and it covers the Corpus Christi-Houston, Texas metropolitan area, the fourth largest population center in the United States, many of us gathered here, thousands of miles away, know somebody living there. It's not an impersonal story. Our daughter's fiancé, John Gardosik, has a mother and father living in Houston. Both are safe, but his mother hasn't yet been able to return to her home to assess any damage. The area is now moving from rescue to recovery and eventually restoration and rebuilding, efforts that will take months and even years.

In the aftermath of disasters such as Harvey you will often hear the stories of determination and grit. "This won't keep us down. We're going to rebuild our homes and our lives," people will say into a television camera in front to a house torn from its foundations or destroyed by flood. We saw this in the aftermath of Katrina 12 years ago, and the storm Sandy that hit New Jersey a couple of years ago. We'll see it in Texas again.

Living with an eye toward the futures when conditions in the present are totally opposite is often regarded as either admirably courageous or stupendously foolish. Noah built a big boat in the middle of dry ground. There was absolutely no way he could ever get it to water to launch. His neighbors laughed at and scorned him. Present conditions dictated building an ark in the middle of a desert was sheer and complete foolishness. Until, of course, it started to rain, and rain, and rain, and rain. Then Noah didn't seem so foolish. Then his neighbors thought him the wisest man in the world. By then, however, it was too late.

That's also how it is with the realm Jesus comes to bring. It's here, but not completely. Jesus is the sovereign Lord of this kingdom, yet people don't recognize him as king. He is unlike any kind of king the world has ever seen. The misunderstanding begins among those most close to Jesus, his own disciples.

Last week we heard Peter speak on behalf of all the disciples. Jesus asked him, "who do you say that I am?" And Peter, with characteristic boldness, answered, "you are the Messiah, the Son of God." Jesus praised Peter for his confession of faith.

Today's gospel reading continues this episode. Jesus now begins to share with his disciples what kind of Messiah, or king, he is going to be. He tells them what lies ahead as he turns towards Jerusalem, that great capital city. There he will suffer greatly at the hands of those in power, and he will be killed. But, in the third day, he will rise from the dead.

Peter once again steps in. "God forbid, Lord. This can't be allowed to happen." One minute Peter confesses Jesus is the Messiah, and then when Jesus tells him what the Messiah must experience, Peter rebukes him. But the same holds true for Jesus. One minute he praises Peter for his bold confession of faith. The next minute he rebukes Peter as a barrier and a stumbling block to his mission.

We know the rest of the story. We hear it every year during Lent and Holy Week. Our gospel this morning represents a turning point in Jesus' life. He leaves the relative security of his home town, and the areas in which he has been teaching and preaching and healing, and sets his eyes on Jerusalem. There the events of which he speaks today will come to pass. The Messiah will indeed suffer greatly at the hands of secular and religious power, he will be crucified and killed. And, then, on the third day, he will rise from the tomb.

This kingdom of which Jesus is now king is like standing at a political convention and introducing the nominee as though he or she was already elected president of the United States. It hasn't yet happened, but everyone acts as though it already has. Jesus is king of a kingdom which has not yet come about in its fullness in the world. Jesus' kingdom is a hidden kingdom and many in the world don't even know it exists. Oh, they may have already heard of Jesus. They may even admire him as a great teacher or prophet, or even somehow, as the incarnation of God. But they don't yet live by the upside down character of this kingdom.

Yes, that's right. Jesus' kingdom is upside down and also inside out from all other earthly kingdoms and philosophies and governments and so-called normal ways of doing things. In the realm of Jesus enemies are to be loved, persecutors are blessed, strangers are welcomed, the lowly have companionship. In Jesus' kingdom one gains life, not by holding on to it, but by letting it go and taking up a cross and following his lead.

St. Paul wrote a letter to a group of Jesus' followers living in the great city of Rome. We hear a portion of that letter read this morning. In it Paul lays out some of the ways followers of Jesus are to live in the world. These are guidelines for living in an upside down kingdom; these are practical rules for living out of step with the rest of the world. Listen carefully again to what he says, and how out of the ordinary this advice actually is: Let love be genuine...outdo one another in showing honor...contribute to the needs of the saints...extend hospitality to strangers...bless those who persecute you, bless and do not curse them...do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly...if your enemies are hungry, feed them, if they are thirsty, give them something to drink...do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."

This past week the Living Lutheran, our church's news and information ministry, began publishing stories of how Lutheran churches in and around the Houston area put into concrete action the kingdom ethics of Jesus. St. Paul Lutheran Church in LaGrange, about 40 miles west of Houston, opened their church doors to the patients of two different nursing homes that needed to be evacuated. St. John Lutheran in Bellville, Christ Lutheran in El Campo and Tree of Life Lutheran in Conroe served as shelters, offering a place to sleep, food and water to those who fled their homes. But these weren't the only Lutheran churches that did so. Many others did as well.

You see, the followers of Jesus live and act as though his kingship and his kingdom were already a fact for the whole world. That's why Christians open their doors, welcome the stranger, pray for their enemies, love those who are unloved in the world. We believe that Jesus' kingdom is not just for us, but will be for everybody. We believe that his kingdom will spread and grow, not by the power of force, but by the power of love. We believe that Jesus' kingdom will spread and grow, not by fighting enemies, but by feeding ones enemies. We believe that Jesus kingdom will spread and grow by first being examples of that kingdom amongst ourselves. For who would want to belong to a kingdom that is based on love if those who claim to belong to it can't even love one another? Who would want to join a kingdom in which life is found by giving it up where even his own followers don't live by that direction and themselves try to hold on to as much as they possibly can? Nobody would, of course. So that's why we are to model that kingdom living in our own daily lives.

The truth is we are followers of this king who rules an upside down, inside out kingdom. We can, and should, live as though his kingdom were already fully present in the world. All it takes is faith and Christian imagination. Imagine trying to shape your decisions and actions by the rules of Jesus' kingdom. Imagine if everyone tried to live by these rules. Why the world might just end up...a better place to live. Amen.