While sport fishing off the Florida coast, a tourist capsized his boat. He could swim, but his fear of alligators kept him clinging to the overturned craft. Spotting a beachcomber on the shore, the tourist shouted, “Are there any alligators around here?”

“Naw,” the man hollered back. “They ain’t been around for years.” Feeling safe, the tourist started swimming leisurely toward the shore. About halfway there, he asked, “How’d you get rid of the gators?”

“We didn’t do nothin’,” the beachcomber said. “The sharks got ‘em.” You can imagine that tourist hightailing it to shore to escape the sharks!

I enjoy the beauty of the ocean and the soothing rhythm of its waves. If you’ve been to the Monterey Bay Aquarium, you cannot help but marvel at the wide variety of sea creatures that populate the ocean depths. But oceans also possess a tremendous power which threatens life. Seas have long been known as wild and unruly, even treacherous. In Hebrew writings, seas, lakes, and rivers represent deep anxiety and even death. In recent days, we’ve seen the deadly power of the violent windstorms that originate in the warm ocean water.

The devastation of an event such as Hurricane Harvey often prompt theological questions, such as, where is God? Did God cook up this storm as a means of sending a message or issuing a punishment for sin? If God is good, why did God allow this to happen? How can we understand why bad things happen to good people?

Our scripture reading helps us answer the question, “Where is God?” The nighttime storm on the Sea of Galilee was not hurricane proportion, but it was a frightening experience for the disciples of Jesus. In the dark of night, they find their boat battered by waves and pushed off course by a strong wind. Exhausted by the physical stress of keeping the boat afloat, nerves are frayed and fear overcomes them. To add to the drama, an apparent ghost approaches. But when the ghost says, “Be encouraged! It’s me. Don’t be afraid,” they recognize the voice of Jesus. Jesus has come to join them in their crisis, to accompany them through the storm. They are not abandoned or left to their own devices.

He was not with them as the storm kicked up; he had stayed behind on the mountain to pray. But in the midst of the storm, Jesus is present to accompany them and to calm their anxious spirits. That’s where God is in the face of disaster, by our side
as a companion, guide, and rock while the chaos swirls around. Christ reaches out a hand and says, “Take heart, it is I. Don’t be afraid.”

God is in southeast Texas with people who have lost homes, communities, family members, pets, material possessions, and a sense of security. God is weeping with them, sharing their sorrow and fear. God is present to encourage them – to inspire their hearts.

Did God cause this disaster or any natural disaster to send a message or as a punishment? No. Frederick Schmidt says, “God does not orchestrate hurricanes or other natural disasters to teach nor to punish. They are a blind force at work in a world that is not curated on a moment to moment basis by God.” With our reason and scientific knowledge, we know that there are natural causes. We may learn from our preparation or lack thereof, and from our response, both positive and negative, as our nation did out of Hurricane Katrina. However, disasters are not an intentional part of God’s curriculum for our educational, spiritual, or moral formation.

Why does God allow bad things to happen? In a sermon titled, “The Promise of Understanding,” John Wesley says we may never know. He said,

[W]e cannot say why God suffered evil to have a place in his creation; why he, who is so infinitely good himself, who made all things ‘very good,’ and who rejoices in the good of all his creatures, permitted what is so entirely contrary to his own nature, and so destructive of his noblest works. ‘Why are sin and its attendant pain in the world?’ has been a question ever since the world began; and the world will probably end before human understandings have answered it with any certainty. Section 2.1

The short answer is: We do not know why natural disasters and other suffering are part of our world.

The most important moral question to ask is, “How will we respond to the need that follows in the wake of a disaster?” This circles back to the first question, “where is God?” It is in our response to suffering that God is found, in moments of everyday grace and in grand sweeping gestures of care and solidarity with the suffering. God’s mighty works are found in rescue operations, hospitals, shelters, and truckloads of donations for sustaining life and rebuilding homes and communities. We are an extension of God’s presence in tragedy as we come alongside those who are suffering in ways we don’t even comprehend. We are called to be agents of healing and hope, representatives of the day of resurrection to come. Jesus calls us to join him in demonstrating the mighty works of God.

Here’s a story about how some United Methodists have responded to Hurricane Harvey. A week ago Saturday when flooding began in Houston, Matthew Marchetti
witnessed the chaos and confusion as he helped with rescue efforts. Houston’s 911 system was completely overwhelmed; volunteer rescuers were arriving but had no way to quickly locate victims.

Marchetti enlisted a fellow member of his church, Chapelwood United Methodist. Saturday night they developed a design for web app called HoustonHarveyRescue.com. It works like Uber for disaster victims – locating people who needed rescue on a map, and connecting them with volunteer rescuers. Those reported as being in imminent danger appeared as red pins on the map. Once rescued, they were marked as “safe.” The site was up and running Sunday by 6 a.m.

The Cajun Navy, an informal network of boat owners volunteering with rescue efforts, posted the website on their Facebook page and the new website lit up. Marchetti was overwhelmed when he realized that this app would really going to save people. By August 30, the website had 1 million hits.

In addition to the Cajun Navy, the men dispatched their own Chapelwood Navy, named after their church. It started on Monday morning when the congregation’s senior pastor and a few members took a boat to rescue a church family. People in the neighborhood saw the opportunity for help. That morning the church’s boat ministry retrieved 25 people. The boat ministry grew so that by Wednesday 30-40 men and five boats were deployed. By Thursday evening the waters in Houston had receded. In those five days, the website handled 7,802 rescue requests – wading through treacherous water to save lives in the name of Jesus Christ.

As we have heard, recovery efforts will continue for years. Even from a distance, we can raise our voices for the voiceless. We can advocate for low-income, African-American, Latino & immigrant people who are vulnerable to discrimination in situations like this. Jesus’ saving hand reaches out to whomever is in need, regardless of class, station, race, color, or creed. Jesus calls us to be agents of hope and healing, to raise up whomever needs to be saved.

In the face of disaster, God is right in the midst of the chaos as a companion for God’s suffering people. The same man who walked on water immerses himself in the deep with those overcome by flood waters, perishing with those who are submerged and rescuing those who are saved. Jesus offers a lifeline to everyone who cries out, “Lord, save me!” and even to those who don’t call his name. Jesus arrives in crises to offer a calming presence, to quiet the storms, to ground us in God’s saving grace. Jesus shows up, oftentimes disguised as ordinary people like you and I. Let us pray Christ’s healing, saving, encouraging presence into the disasters of this day.
Gracious God, you so desire to journey with us that you sent Jesus to be one with us, to share our human experience and to draw us near to you. We are assured by your promise to be with us always.

Holy Comforter, we seek your healing presence on behalf of the thousands of people whose lives have been devastated by flood, fire, disaster, and violence. Reach out to the people of Southeast Texas and Louisiana as they discern how to move forward. Into their frazzled minds, speak your word of peace, “Take heart, I am with you. Be not afraid.” Accompany those seeking health care, looking for family members, tossing beloved possessions, and longing for a safe place to reside. Offer safety to those in our state who are fleeing dangerous fires.

Encourage rescue workers, first responders, health professionals, public safety officials, and volunteers tirelessly working to serve their neighbors in need. Restore their strength and patience. Work alongside fire fighters battling blazes in our state and nation. We give thanks for all who labor in the service of the common good.

Grant wisdom to President Trump and our national leaders as they seek the welfare of our nation and all its residents. We pray for peace in relationship to North Korea, and for an end to taunts and threats.

In the face of chaos, keep us attuned to your still small voice, a voice of comfort, a voice of reason, a voice of compassion. May our words and acts be aligned with your desires for the goodness of your people.

Guide our community as it wrestles with how to serve the homeless among us. Reach out to ease the anxiety of those seeking stability, employment, and hope for their futures. Embolden them to step out with courage.

Offer your calming presence to those living with chronic health conditions and others coping with illness. Comfort all who grieve.

Guide your church, O God, that we might be instruments of Christ’s saving ministry. Amen.

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