

Matthew 16:1-4

**The Pharisees and Sadducees came,
and to test Jesus they asked him to show them a sign from heaven.
He answered them,
‘When it is evening, you say, “It will be fair weather, for the sky is red.”
And in the morning, “It will be stormy today,
for the sky is red and threatening.”**

**You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky,
but you cannot interpret the signs of the times.**

**An evil and adulterous generation asks for a sign,
but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah.
Then he left them and went away.**

Meditation:

**This isn't the Gospel I thought I was going to read today...
This isn't the meditation I prepared last week...**

I saved all of that for another time...

**Watching Hurricanes Harvey and Irma...
anticipating Hurricane Jose,
watching the wild fires Montana, California and British Columbia...
heat waves in Portland and Seattle...
a cooler than usual summer here in the Midwest...**

**I've heard people talking about the Apocalypse again...
I've heard people wondering if the end of the world was near
and I've been told that Bible verses are being tossed around again**

claiming to prophesy these as the end times...

I have even read about one conservative radio talk show host who claimed it was easier for her to believe that Hurricane Harvey was Houston's punishment from God for electing a gay mayor in 2010 than it was for her to believe that the hurricane had *anything* to do with climate change.

(Ann Coulter & Annise Parker, mayor 2010-2016, one of the first openly gay mayors of a major U.S. city).
Hog wash!!

It seems that anytime a horrific large scale tragedy happens...

terrorist bombings,

earthquakes,

hurricanes,

tornadoes

wildfires...whatever...

there seems to be a segment of the religious population that interprets these tragedies as God's indictment of whom ever or whatever they disapprove of.

I suppose blaming other people makes them feel in control and for many, being in control is an important but often unrecognized need...

There segments of the religious population that take the Bible literally and look for ways of being on the winning side...

but these folks seem to often forget that Jesus turned upside down what it means to win and to lose...

There are segments of the religious population that want the Bible to be a crystal ball foretelling the future instead of a transformative path inviting everyone with eyes to see and ears to hear the unconditional, unboundaried love of God...

**In our reading today Jesus says there will be no sign from God...
and only an evil and adulterous generation would seek one...
and that God's only sign will be the sign of Jonah...
but what is that???**

Now just to refresh your memory...

**The Book of Jonah is consider part of the Prophetic Tradition in the Hebrew Scriptures.
Prophecy in the Bible IS NOT...I repeat IS NOT predicting the future...
it is not looking into a crystal ball...**

A prophet in the Hebrew Biblical sense is one who spoke truth to Power...

**They were men who would tell the King of Israel or the people
when God's ways were not being followed.....**

**Now, it is true that ancient peoples believed that storms and floods and wild fires
were cause by God who sat on a throne high above his kingdom.**

**When people didn't do what the God wanted them to do he would punish them,
just like any earthly king would do to his subjects....**

**There is a saying that humanity was made in God's image...
and they we returned the favor!**

More often than not we believe God thinks like us...

rather than allowing God to shape our minds and hearts to think like God...

But Jesus came to change peoples' minds about this kind of God...

According to Franciscan Priest Richard Rohr,

who has written extensively on the Sign of Jonah...

the sign of Jonah is the pattern of birth and death and new life

a pattern that is an inherent part of life...an integral and non negotiable part of creation.

Jonah goes into the darkness of the belly of the fish for three days

before he is able to do will of God....

Jesus suffered death on the cross before he is Risen from the tomb...

Rohr says there is a pattern here that we see in all great spiritual traditions that we even see in nature.

There is the cycle of the seasons

there are patterns of darkness into light into darkness into new light....

life into death into new life...

There are some segments of Modern Christianity that only like the light, some call it a prosperity gospel...

Some modern Christians think that if you do everything 'right' you will achieve all worldly success and heavenly rewards as well.

That you will not suffer,

that disease or disaster will not affect you...

Ha! Life isn't like that!

If you think that is true, you are in for a tough awakening.

But how many times have you heard:

what did I do that God is punishing me for?

or you shouldn't have to deal with this...you are such a good person....

Life IS the ebb and flow of hardship and ease...

suffering and joy....

Everything new comes from the death of something else...

life is cyclical and circular...

not just a straight shot up or down depending upon how good or not you are...

So what does all this have to do with Hurricanes Harvey, Irma and the wildfires?

#1: These storms are not a punishment or a sign from God.

The people of Houston or St. Thomas or any other group people down here

are NOT being punished by a Divine Creator who lives UP THERE .

These storms are not predicted in the Bible.

If you hear people claiming Biblical prophesy for the punishment of ‘those’ people, ignore them.

That is not biblical prophesy...that is only their need for control and their ego’s need to believe that they are not to blame.

and #2. If you are willing to entertain Rohr’s explanation of the sign of Jonah....
that real transformation begins i darkness
then perhaps we can use these tumultuous times and these grave situations
for the growth of our souls, our minds and our hearts....

Are wildfires sometimes caused by human carelessness or intent?

Absolutely!

Are there hurricanes and tornadoes and floods and earthquakes that reek tragedy upon people and other living beings....

Such seems to be the nature of life on Earth.

Life is fragile and unpredictable.

Life is often hard and confusing and most often paradoxical...

there is horror and there is beauty ...

there is cruelty and there is kindness ...

there is sorrow and there is joy ...

there is death and there is birth ...

there is evil and there is Love..

That is why the gift of the Life and Death of Jesus is so radically powerful...

much more powerful than rule following...

He taught us about his Abba God who loves everyone unconditionally...

He taught us that God lives not far away unconcerned from us,

but about a God who loves all of us like our own ‘Daddy’ would....

**He taught us that it wasn't about being perfect,
but about being forgiving and allowing Love to flow freely...**

**The values and qualities that he gave his life for:
the values of mercy, forgiveness, compassion, generosity
and Love are the qualities that sustains all of us through the hard
and fragile times of life on this living planet.**

**So perhaps we can use these really days of uncertainty to grow
our minds, our spirits and our souls...**

**Perhaps we will be willing to be transformed into a new way of being human:
kinder and more compassionate and less judgmental**

**Perhaps-- since we cannot escape the images or the consequences of the storms
no matter where on Earth they happen...**

we will finally recognize that all of life is connected...

and that what happens to our neighbor, no matter where they live, affects us....

Perhaps we will finally see our neighbor truly, concretely as ourselves..

**Perhaps we will begin to realize as a species that our fate as a human beings
depends upon being in relationship with the entire Earth community...**

because we are mutually dependent and interrelated with all of life...

and perhaps we will choose to walk lightly upon this good green Earth,

to be gentle with our use of Earth's resources

and to respect all that the Holy One has created....

Let me once say it once again:

**Our God...the God of Jesus the Christ is not a Divine King sitting on a heavenly throne
somewhere in the heavens far, far away**

condemning and punishing by storm and fire

all those we judge to be sinful...

No...That is not the Abba God that Jesus gave his life for...

The Abba God of Jesus is an Divine power presence already and always intimately embedded in the everything that is created.

Our God, the Abba God of Jesus the Christ,

is with those who are suffering giving them the courage and strength to make it through their darkness...

and our God is with us as we sit in the calm of life, in this beautiful space, inviting us to recognize that we have Divine courage and strength and enough resources to do what we can to alleviate any suffering we encounter...

So...let us take heart! Let us not give into fear or despair...

let us look for the helpers and be one ourselves..

Let us find the light in the darkness...and lead others to it...

For when we do we will find ourselves spit out on the shore of Hope ...

and then of course, the only thing we will be able to say is: thank you.

Amen.