

**Westminster Presbyterian Church + 533 S. Walnut St. + Springfield, IL 62704**

**Dr. Lonnie H. Lee**

June 1, 2008

**Living Through a Storm**

Genesis 7:18b

On this Baccalaureate Sunday I want to invite you to contemplate what it means to be tested in life. In the 7<sup>th</sup> chapter of the Gospel of Matthew Jesus speaks of the kind of testing that all of us undergo by using the imagery of a storm. Storms expose the foundations of our lives. Sometimes those foundations are shown to be solid, enabling us to weather the worst of the storms. But sometimes life foundations are shown to be poorly constructed. Then the storm places everything at risk.

The question Jesus raises in this passage has been playing out in the news coverage of the recent earthquake and aftershocks in China. We are hearing reports of hundreds, maybe thousands, of lives lost because of shoddy construction practices. Schools and other public buildings may have been improperly constructed because of graft and corruption. The earthquake has exposed the inadequate foundations of those buildings and the deficiencies of the social process which produced them. The result is unnecessary death and destruction.

Jesus challenges his listeners to examine the foundations of their lives in the light of his teaching. He points out that those who listen and live by his teaching are building on a solid foundation. This challenge comes at the end of the Sermon on the Mount. There Jesus takes the conventional wisdom of his time and turns it upside down. This is an important message for our graduating seniors. We are part of a culture that worships success. Making success the top priority in life encourages people and societies to take shortcuts. Shoddy building practices happen in America, too. More than one economist has observed that unethical and exploitative business practices have contributed to the present economic downturn. Jesus wants us to understand the destructive consequences of measuring our worth by wealth or power.

Jesus says that it is not the successful or the powerful or the wealthy who are blessed. It is the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger for the righteousness they don't have, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, and those who are persecuted for righteousness who receive the blessing of God. It is those who know they are vulnerable who are blessed. The Sermon on the Mount invites us to embrace our weakness. When we know we are weak we understand that we need a good foundation and we cannot build it alone.

My Scots-Irish ancestors understood this truth. When they arrived in Illinois in 1831, they had been "on the road" for almost 60 years. They left Ireland in 1772 and spent about 30 years in North Carolina. Then they headed for Tennessee where they lived about eight years. Then they spent 22 years in Western Kentucky before crossing the Ohio River into the promised land of Illinois. For all this time they were traveling with the same group of families with whom they had bonded in Ireland. They intermarried within these families. They built their homes together. They grew their crops together. They fought against outlaws and hostile Indians together. Most important of all, they worshiped together as Presbyterians. Sometimes they had a minister and sometimes there were no ministers available in the remote areas where they lived. They survived on the frontier because they brought their community with them.

One of the things that astounds me is that my history books in high school and college never told this part of the story. The storyline that I picked up was that these pioneers were rugged individualists. They left their previous communities behind to gain a greater sense of personal freedom. For this purpose they were happy to face the dangers of the frontier alone. But the truth is that most early American settlers were not trying to go it alone. They knew they needed to be part of a close-knit community. They knew they were too weak to succeed by themselves. They knew that their survival depended on being connected to a foundation of faith and community that they could not provide for themselves.

This is a truth that is affirmed in the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> chapters of Genesis. There we find the story of a man who makes a very unlikely journey with a very unusual community. Noah's journey begins with a message from God about the moral depravity of the society in which he lived. Whatever he may have thought of the outlandish suggestion that he build an ark, Noah understood that the society in which he lived was built on a weak foundation that would most likely wash away in a storm. Frederick Buechner has speculated on what was going through Noah's mind as he finished construction and saw the rains begin:

His thoughts, one imagines, were of water, as the windows of heaven were opened and the fountains of the great deep burst forth so that the sea crept in over the earth, and where there had been dry land and order all was disorder and violence, perhaps Noah knew that it had always been so. Perhaps Noah knew that all the order and busy-ness of humanity had been at best an illusion and that, left to themselves human beings had always been doomed. The waters came scudding in over forest and field, sliding in across kitchen floors and down cellar stairs, rising above television aerials and the steeples of churches, and death was everywhere as death is always everywhere, men and women trapped alone as they are always trapped, always alone, in office or locker room, bedroom or bar, people grasping out for something solid and sure...Maybe the chaos was no greater than it has ever been. Only wetter (*The Hungering Dark*, pages 39-40).

That indeed is the darkest side of this dark tale. The rushing waters of chaos are not restricted to one particular moment in history because they are always threatening our lives. The storms are always with us. And we are always weak and vulnerable, looking for something solid to hang onto.

But Noah came to know the grace of God in the midst of the onrushing waters of chaos. For by God's grace he had been given the work to build an ark and by God's grace "the ark floated on the face of the waters (Genesis 7:18b)." It was undoubtedly a strange vessel on which Noah and his bizarre family of people and animals were crowded. Noah understood the truth of the old joke that if it weren't for the storm without, they couldn't have stood the stench within the boat. Some have made the same observation about the church. But there was comfort in the fact that the rickety ark provided safety and shelter from the dangerous storm which raged outside.

At the heart of this dark tale we can find the grace of God reaching out to us. That grace summons us to do together what we can never do for ourselves. Together we are to build faith communities in which we can weather any storm.

