

Before we touch on the scripture passage for today, I just want to point out that it is exactly one year ago that Hurricane Irma was coming up through the keys to make landfall here in southwest Florida. It wasn't exactly surprising, considering that this time of September is considered the peak of hurricane season. What was surprising was that everyone was expecting it to go north through Miami, not Naples.

Someone observed that what made us most nervous wasn't only the wind velocity, but the threat of a huge storm surge. If that had happened, instead of living in the Neapolitan city we would have been residing in the Naples Aquarium.

Atmospheric turbulence is something that folks in Florida have come to expect. It's just part of life here during the months of August through October. We also expect turbulence in other parts of our lives as well: health, employment, children, retirement, the stock market, and politics. If it's not one thing, it's another. Even in church. And even in the life of Jesus.

The story that was read today could be understood as just another typical healing miracle story from the Gospels. I would suggest that the emotional condition of both Jesus and the woman in the story are worth our attention this morning.

The story is set up by the preceding sections. Mark tells us how Jesus was engaging people from all around Galilee, providing all kinds of healing. Then the Pharisees enter the picture, nitpicking about his disciples who weren't washing their hands according to tradition.

As we read it, Jesus is not very diplomatic in his response to the Pharisees, calling them out on their own hypocrisy. This isn't the only time in the Gospels when we see Jesus fed up and angry with what's going on.

So, exhausted from all the work of healing, and understandably discouraged with the joy-stealing criticism of the Pharisees, Jesus has had enough. Mark says that from there he arose and went away to the region of Tyre and Sidon. They didn't call it vacation in those days, but that's what it was. He had to get away, even if it was to Gentile territory. He had to get some peace and quiet.

Unfortunately, it didn't last long. A particular woman that Mark doesn't name found out he was in the neighborhood and she went to him because she had a daughter who seemed to be possessed by a demon. This is not an untypical diagnosis made by parents about their children, especially in their young teen years. It is noteworthy that Mark doesn't say anything about the husband in this story, so once again, mom is left to deal with it. This should not surprise us.

Anyway, the mother in this story is desperate for a solution. Her life is also turbulent. Day after day she has put up with a frustrating and perplexing malady afflicting her daughter, and she is at the end of her rope. She hears about Jesus and decides that there is only one thing to do : ask for help. So she goes, and what kind of reception does she receive?

Mark doesn't paint a warm and fuzzy picture here. We've got an exhausted Jesus who needs quiet and a desperate mom who needs help, and when she asks, what she gets is a brush-off. The exhausted Jesus says, Look, my work is with my people first, and I'm here on vacation. I have to help my own Jewish people first, and I can't waste my energy on non-Jews. Pretty blunt.

Now the desperate mother comes back with her retort: Ok, Lord, I get that, she says. But the little puppies under the table still get to eat the crumbs that fall there from the children. What she means, of course, is that she recognizes that she is considered a second class person in the eyes of the Jews of those days, but she and her daughter are still human beings in need of help, and she won't be put off. She's not giving up, even if Jesus needs to be pushed.

Now, Jesus is impressed. He's impressed with her as a mother, as an advocate for her child, as a person of hope and persistence, and as a person who recognizes that even though there may be an ethnic and cultural divide between Jews and Gentiles, the realities of the human condition call for a compassion that transcends divisions.

And so Jesus says, I hear you. You can go home. And the demon has left your daughter.

And so it was. The turbulence was over for the moment, both for Jesus and the woman. But we all know that it would be back, just in a different form and in a different way. It might even get worse. And we know that it did, eventually in the form of a crucifixion.

There are also some other things we know, especially from our turbulent hurricane season that gets replayed every year. We know things that everyone knows.

For example, we know that the anticipation of the turbulence is almost worse than the storm. Everyone rushes to the stores to stock up. Everyone is in the mood for speculation. What if this happens, what if that happens, what will become of us, what will we do? Will we stay or evacuate?

Then we all experience those famous words: Your regular programming is being pre-empted to bring you the latest from the Hurricane warning center in Miami. Did you know that the United States has built only three hurricane warning centers: the one in Coral Gables, one in Honolulu, and one in Guam. All three have experienced Category Four storms, which only goes to show that if you build it, they will come.

I don't know about you, but the thing that irritates me the most about these pre-empting weather people is that they go on and on when they could simply update the situation in ten minutes and be done. But no, when the storms come, the weather people finally get their chance to preach.

So, along with anticipation and pre-empting comes that next suggestion: We urge you all to hunker down and keep safe until the power comes back on or Jesus comes again. One of the two. Hunker down is an interesting phrase.

One particular author describes the phrase as an ugly description of an unflattering body position which hardly relates to hiding from a storm for many hours. Nobody, she says, is going to squat for hours at a time, not even a National League baseball catcher.

Another thing we all know, even after experiencing Irma, is that it was bad for a little while, but could have been worse. Yes, it made a big mess for many people, and yes, we knew it would take time and patience and a lot of insurance money to get cleaned up and back to a sense of normalcy. But it was a storm, and it wouldn't last forever.

There are, for me, a few spiritual lessons in all of this. I am a Christian; I don't walk on water or storm surges, and I am no more immune to anxiety, anticipation, annoyance, and the effects of turbulence than anyone else. However, those of us who are grounded in faith seem to approach turbulence and its aftermath a bit differently.

For example, when the lights go back on, we don't just say, Thank God FPL got those crews out like they're supposed to considering what we pay for electricity these days. No, we say, Thank you God, that we're safe. Keep those FPL line-workers safe, too.

Then, instead of complaining about how long it's taking the stores and gas stations to get restocked and the streets to be cleaned up, we remain quietly alert, realizing that our suffering, if you want to call it that, is nothing compared to the suffering of others.

And so, instead of going on our merry ways, we realize that we have many different opportunities to put compassion into action, and to help others who aren't able to help themselves very well.

So turbulence is all around. It was all around for Jesus. It was all around for the Syrian woman. It's in our nation, and it's in our church. How can we trust God in the middle of such turbulence?

I don't know about you, but as people of faith, we do have a few tools to help us.

First, God has given us a level of personal reflective insight to know and admit that we each play a part in the turbulence; that it's not just someone else's problem. In humility I have to recognize that when I point the finger at someone else, there are three fingers pointing right back at me.

Second, we have the ability to clean up our own side of the street. Are we doing the next right thing? Are we contributing to the problem, or contributing to the solution?

Third, are we praying? Are we taking the thoughts and emotions and anxieties that come with the turbulence and giving them to God, asking for help and wisdom?

Finally, are we being the servants of Christ that we are called to be? Are we stepping up to the plate, or heckling from the bleachers? I consider the heart, the hands, the feet, and the voice that God has given me: am I using those to contribute to the turbulence, or to bring peace?

These are a few of the tools that we have been invited to employ in the midst of turbulence. It's not something that any of us are able to avoid.

So the solution to riding out the turbulence is most simply put by Peter, the disciple who was closest to Jesus. In his letter he writes, "When you are suffering and hurting, continue to do the next right thing, and entrust your soul to a faithful Creator. Cast all your cares upon God, because God cares about you."

Amen.