
Living through a Hurricane

Matthew 16:21-28

A sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on Sunday, September 3, 2017,
by the Rev. Dr. Luke A. Powery

Life is like a box of chocolates, you never know what you're gonna get. Do you know who said that? The great theologian Forest Gump. He wasn't talking about the Christian life but what he says is relevant for it. You never know what you're gonna get. It may not always be sweet chocolates either; there could be a box of nails. Chocolates, nails, a new academic year—the point is that you never know what you're gonna get. Hawaii weather one day and Hurricane Harvey in Houston the next. The rain, the flooding, the loss of human life and livelihood, the devastation and frustration, hanging on to light posts to survive the rushing rising waters, giving contemporary meaning to the words of the Psalmist, “Save me, O God, for the water is up to my neck” (Psalm 69), literally. You never know what tomorrow will bring and ancient wisdom tells us that tomorrow isn't even promised.

One family in Houston found out how quickly things can change. The water rose so fast and furious in their area; they weren't really ready for the flooding to occur so quickly. This couple has two kids with down syndrome, a three-legged dog, and a pig named Penny—all of them were trapped in their house as the water rose. By an act of grace, they were rescued and brought to safety. In another situation, Officer Steve Perez decided to leave his home to help those in need in Houston. His wife asked him not to go but the dedicated Perez told her, “We've got work to do.” On his way to work on Sunday, he drowned. You never what you're gonna get in a hurricane.

Hurricanes and storms make landfall and you think the worst has happened at that point and then it will eventually die. But then it leaves the land and returns to make another landfall. It's not easy to live through a hurricane for hurricanes don't die easy. If an eclipse didn't alert us to the fact that we aren't in control of life then a hurricane should! A hurricane should knock us out of the craze of capitalism, consumerism, commercialization and commodification. It should be a natural recalibration of the priorities of our lives. What do I prioritize and why? Who am I and who do I want to be? What am I supposed to do? If I lived in view of dying in a hurricane, how might that change my way of living right now? Is the life that I am living the life that wants to live in me? Am I living a meaningless life and will I die a meaningful death? Questions that a hurricane can help raise in our consciousness.

Yet many of us only live in a sunny Hawaii world and forget that hurricanes, like the one in Houston, can come into our lives at any moment. But many of us don't want to even think about dying and death and instead sound like Woody Allen and say, “I am not afraid of death, I just don't want to be there when it happens.” You never know what you're gonna get but rest assured that the words of Benjamin Franklin in a letter are true— “in this world nothing can be said to be certain, except death and taxes.” Living through a hurricane and facing death can help you in life.

The words of Jesus about life come in the context of death because life and death are related. In Matthew, Jesus is anticipating his own kind of hurricane that will take landfall on his body and rip him apart on a cross. This is the first time Jesus tells his disciples that he's going to undergo

suffering and death but this won't be the last time (cf. 17:22-23, 20:17-29). The disciples didn't sign up for this, we didn't sign up for this, as they and others expected a triumphant Messiah, not a tormented one who would die on a cross. And if this wasn't enough, Jesus tells them, "if any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." You never know what you're gonna get in walking with Christ. There are no promises of a pain-free passport to the pearly gates of heaven. Rather, it seems more like a death sentence, confirming what Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote years ago, "When Christ calls [us], he bids [us] come and die." But many of us don't want to face any kind of death with our eyes wide open. We'd prefer to die, as one actor says, "in my sleep like my grandfather... Not screaming and yelling like the passengers in his car" (Will Shriner). We can't handle it, don't want to hold it or hear it. But hurricanes, impending crosses, will force you to face it. And there is a storm brewing in the scriptures, whether we like or not. We all have to live through hurricanes of some sort.

And just when I was getting tired of the lectionary, today's words scream out a truthful question in light of what is happening in Texas: "For what will it profit [us] if [we] gain the whole world but forfeit [our] life? Or what will [we] give in return for [our] life?" Life is so precious and though we may want to avoid any talk of death, we may actually be killing ourselves already in the vain pursuit of gaining the whole world. But to what end? We can be so focused on 'stuff' that we lose our lives in the process. If you gain the whole world, you've probably already lost your life. You can gain everything and have nothing. Job success, money, land, degrees, social standing, trusts, estates, championships, fellowships, grants, girlfriends, boyfriends, and honors, are not life. They may be a part of life but they are not *your* life. What is your life? Are you well—mentally, physically, emotionally, spiritually? Duke wouldn't have a wellness center if we were well. We, like Peter, may pay too close attention to human things and not enough on divine things. We may grasp for earthly glory but Jesus shows us that his glory is gory, that life comes through death. But we don't really want to die to our 'stuff.' We like the accoutrements but you can gain the whole world and still be empty, still lose your life. On the outside, things appear to be going well, but inside you feel like hell. Because maybe, just maybe, you are living a life other than your own.

Rose was one of my former parishioners. She and I sat in a restaurant to share a meal together many summers ago. She told me about her relationship with her husband and how he had abused her and her daughter for many years and yet she remained married to him. At one point in the conversation, after hearing the horrific stories and seeing the tears of pain drop from her face, I said to her, "that's not living." Rose said, "Luke, I died a long time ago." There are people who may be breathing but they are dead. They've lost their life for all the wrong reasons. I'm reminded of the wise saying, "It is not death that [one] should fear, but [one] should fear never beginning to live" (Marcus Aurelius). What does it profit you to gain the whole world and lose your life?

Hurricanes will strip all pretenses away. I lived through Hurricane Andrew in South Florida in 1992; it was a late high school graduation present, right before I headed off to college. There was no pretending during the night when the power went off and in the dark, all you could hear was the rain and the howling of the wind. The only protection on the windows was tape. We had no shutters but we shuddered. I remember listening on a battery-operated radio to a station where a news reporter risked their life to give the latest news in the midst of the storm. Daylight eventually came and the next morning, my father and I jumped in the car and drove around to see what damage had been done in our area but especially to head down further south where the storm was stronger and my aunt lived. While we drove, we saw long assembly lines for water, buildings that once stood tall and mighty swept to the ground and were no more, roof tops ripped off homes, like at my aunt's, leaving

a hole to the heavens looking down on the hell and wreckage. When you get down to the bare necessities, you see your naked spirituality. When you face the reality of death, perhaps it is then that you really learn about what's important in life and what is life.

The disciples learn about the impending death of Jesus and in that setting, they learn about their own death and life. They discover that they are not what they own nor what they do. What will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? In this early stage of an impending cruciform storm, they have to confront the words of poet William Stafford, "Ask me whether what I have done is my life" (William Stafford). This is something for us all to consider. "For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for [Christ's] sake will find it." There is a life that requires a death to live, a cross to bear. This is subversive wisdom unlike anything else. Professor Alyce McKenzie notes that "traditional wisdom echoed our secular saying, "Finders keepers, losers weepers." [But] Jesus' version was "Finders weepers, losers keepers!" Losing, losing your life, is the goal because by taking up the cross, you actually find life's true meaning and gain life. Our conversion should be an inversion of normative thinking, being, and doing. If you gain everything, accumulate more and more, you can still have nothing and possess a lesser life, leading to the death of your soul. Losers keepers.

The life we are called to live is a life that loses itself in Christ. By losing your life and carrying a cross, you gain life in Christ and the life that wants to live in you. The more you lose, the more you gain because your true life is found by giving away your life. Jesus came that we may have life and have it more abundantly (John 10) even while we recognize that his kingdom entails a cross. When you sign up to follow Jesus, you sign up to die, to carry a cross, to suffer, to expect hurricanes and storms and winds to blow. You live to die to live. And who doesn't want to live? What does it profit you to gain the whole world but forfeit your life?

It is true that as a follower of Jesus you never know what you're gonna get but "to live without him is the real death, [and] to die with him the only life" (Frederick Buechner).

*Though the storms keep on raging in my life;
And sometimes it's hard to tell the night from day;
Still that hope that lies within is reassured
As I keep my eyes upon the distant shore;
I know He'll lead me safely to that blessed place He has prepared.*

*But if the storms don't cease,
And if the winds keep on blowing in my life,
My soul has been anchored in the Lord.*

A Houston man returned to his flooded home to get his kids' stuffed animals, and what he did next blew me away. He sat down at his upright piano, while the water was just as high as his piano bench, and played music on the ivory keys amid the aftermath of a hurricane. "Though the storms keep on raging in my life... My soul is anchored in the Lord." An elderly man was stuck in his truck in Houston's flood. His truck was sinking with him in it. But some folks nearby formed a human chain to reach his truck in order to rescue this elderly man and pull him out. Story after story about living through a hurricane.

The reality of dying can shape our living in such a way that we learn that life is about giving our life as people risk life to save life. In the movie, "Life is Beautiful," Guido Orefice is a young Jewish man who is in the Kingdom of Italy in 1939 and arrives to work in a city where his uncle Eliseo operates a restaurant. Guido is humorous and a sharp young man who falls in love with a girl named Dora. Though Dora was set to be married to someone else, she falls for him too. Guido loved Dora so much that he steals her from her engagement party on a horse. They are married eventually and have a son, Giosuè.

When World War II breaks out, Guido, his uncle, Eliseo, and Giosuè are seized on Giosuè's birthday. They and other Jews are forced onto a train and taken to a concentration camp. Dora confronts a guard about her husband and son and is told there is no mistake, so Dora gets on the train in order to be close to her family. As men and women are separated in the camp so are Dora and Guido and they never see each other during the internment. But Guido pulls off stunts at different points, such as using the camp's loudspeaker to send messages to Dora to assure her that he and their son are safe. His uncle Eliseo, however, is eventually executed in a gas chamber.

While in the camp, Guido hides their true and dire situation from his son. Guido tells Giosuè that the camp is a complicated game in which he must do the tasks Guido gives him. Each of the tasks will earn them points and whoever gets to one thousand points first will win a tank. He tells him that if he cries, complains in any way, or says that he's hungry, he'll lose points, while quiet boys who hide from the camp guards earn extra points. Guido maintains this story right until the end when, in the commotion of shutting down the camp as the Allied forces approach, he tells his son to stay in a box until everyone has left; this, he said, was the final competition before the tank is his. He leaves his son in the box and Guido goes to find Dora, but is caught by a German soldier. An officer makes the decision to execute Guido, who is led off by the soldier. While he is walking to his death, Guido passes by Giosuè one last time; he remains in character, playing the game. He winks at Giosuè and Giosuè winks back at his daddy as Guido is led away to be shot. The next morning, Giosuè emerges from the sweat-box, just as a U.S. Army unit led by a Sherman tank arrives and the camp is liberated. The prisoners travel to safety, accompanied by the Americans. Giosuè sees his mother Dora in the procession leaving the camp and they are reunited. Later, as an older man, Giosuè realizes his father's story of sacrifice for his family, how he gave his life to save his son's life.

Life is like a box of chocolates, wooden crosses, or even hurricanes and new academic years; you never know what you're gonna get. And with everything that is going on, you may come to the point and say, "Lord, I can't." But God responds, "I'm glad to hear you say that. Through you, I can"(Lloyd Ogilvie). Be someone's lifesaver today. This is what Jesus is for us. He gave his life and now we have life, so don't forfeit it. Go and live and help others do the same.