

KATRINA

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This is a Homily preached at Saint John's Parish, on Labor Day weekend, 2005. These comments are simply a selective collage of observations, concluding with a scriptural response, reflected in one of the scripture texts appointed for this Sunday in Pentecost Season, Year A, Propher 18.

"The Lord done give us a whoppin'."

The old man, an African American, sitting on the ground outside the Superdome in New Orleans, had been reading his Bible, flopped open on his lap. He'd been reading about the epic floods, and the plagues, and the various calamities God had wrought on his chosen ones; as well as their enemies. "The Lord done give us a whoppin'," was the best he could surmise. But why?

Making sense of it all was more difficult, and hard to say. Was it the Lord who was displeased by somethin' or just the capricious and indiscriminate nature of Mother Nature? That, and the subsequent shock that we – of all peoples – could not avert the consequences of something more powerful than the most powerful nation on earth?

News commentators and reporter teams early in the week would return from their video reconnaissance missions with alarm. "This is something you see in 3rd-world countries," they'd say. People are dying on the streets in front of your eyes, with no immediate government assistance to the rescue them. "This isn't supposed to happen in America."

And why were the vast majority of images of the stranded hurricane victims African American? As more than one commentator explained it, roughly two-thirds of New Orleans is African American; and 43% of that population lives at or below the poverty level. Did we not know third-world peoples live in this first-world nation in vast numbers?

The poorest of the poor who had survived the storm surge that wiped out the low-lying coastal communities had nowhere to go, and no means to get there. For many of the thousands who huddled in the Superdome shelter without food or water, it was the first time they'd ever been there; and there was no sport in it. What do you do when the evacuation center needs to be evacuated, but you can't?

One man in his small outlying community had fled to high ground. It was the cemetery, built there in the hopes the dead would remain at rest, rather than the periodic floods give up their dead. He was sleeping on top of the family tomb, staying off the ground, to avoid the snakes. "The cottonmouths and water moccasins are very poisonous you know," he said.

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Given the alternatives, it was less dangerous than the inner city perhaps, where matters were deteriorating into chaos and lawlessness within two days after Katrina finally made expected landfall. There was scattered looting that became widespread, along with all the rational moral distinctions reporters tried to make of it. Stealing the necessities of life that would only spoil anyway was justifiable, they'd say.

On the other hand, stealing wide-screen TV's and other electronic gadgetry in a city with no power seemed somehow baffling and inexcusable. But why? Think about it. Here was the first, best and perhaps only opportunity some people had ever had to possess something they may never ever have again in their life. It was theirs for the taking and having. The fact they had no practical use for any of it hardly mattered.

It seems a natural reaction when chaos reigns down on us that we seek some semblance of control through logic. But the nature of catastrophe is that it is illogical.

City officials and the police commissioner in New Orleans seemed to grasp this. Interviewed on TV throughout the week, many of their on-the-air comments were bleeped out by the network censors. The Sunday paper this morning reported more than two hundred city police officers had walked off the job and quit. Discovering their home and family gone, two had committed suicide.

And to make matters worse, already the political fallout, repercussions and blame game has begun. Already the pundits are speculating how a natural disaster may hamper a president's second term agenda more than a war halfway around the world ever could.

Midweek the President flew over the devastation at 2,500 feet in Air Force One on his way back from vacation; then returned two days later for an on-the-ground assessment. "I don't think anyone anticipated the breach of the levees," he'd said.

It had already been widely reported in the press that the Army Corps of Engineers had asked for \$105 million for hurricane and flood programs in New Orleans last year. In the ongoing balancing act of risk and priorities the White House had cut it to about \$40 million.

In June 2004, Walter Maestri, emergency management chief for Jefferson Parish, fretted to *The Times-Picayune* in New Orleans: "It appears that the money has been moved in the president's budget to handle homeland security and the war in Iraq, and I suppose that's the price we pay. Nobody locally is happy that the levees can't be finished, and we are doing everything we can to make the case that this is a security issue for us."

Now everybody's hummin' a slight variation of Don McLean's old tune: "Bye-bye Miss American Pie, drove my Chevy to the levee, but the levee ain't dry."

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One of Mississippi Senator, Trent Lott's homes was destroyed by the coastal storm. Offering words of encouragement and hope for a new future, on Friday, George Bush said his friend would build and a new "fantastic house." I'm sure he will. "And I look forward to sitting on the porch," the President said. I'm sure he does.

"The Lord done give us a whoppin'." Or so it would seem to the old man who was there to see it. In another context I might be inclined to dispute his theological presuppositions; but somehow, in the moment now, it hardly matters.

Meanwhile, you'd think the rest of the world would have stopped turning on its axis in this surreal, out-of-this-world, mean-time. Nonetheless, the world around us goes on. The chief justice of the Supreme Court died quietly yesterday. Nearly 1,000 Muslim pilgrims died in a rumor-driven human stampede in Baghdad this week. Over 200,000 people died of starvation again this week on the African continent.

And here in Clayton, it's the holiday weekend and the end of another summer. In the relative cocoon of this place, in this time, we have our own folks who are troubled, or grieving, sick or dying. We have members of our congregation who've lived and worked on some of those streets in that submerged and devastated city. Among us are those who have friends and family from New Orleans and the Gulf Coast, who escaped with their lives and little else.

So we pass the plate and take up another collection to contribute to those in need who have less. Our youth will wash cars in the parking lot after worship for a donation of \$5, or \$10 or more. And mindfully we'll read again the words of Paul to the Church in Rome, appointed for this particular Sunday in Pentecost season; and re-commit ourselves to live these words:

Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. ... Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Romans 12:9-21