

August 15, 2010 Ultimate Survival: Recognize When Things Get Urgent Luke 12:49-56

A sermon to the glory of God for the people at First Christian Church by Mary Jane Button-Harrison and David Digby

MJ: ⁴⁹*This is serious business we're involved in.* My mission is to send a purging fire on the earth! In fact, I can hardly wait to see the smoke rising. ⁵⁰I have a kind of ceremonial washing to go through, and I can't relax until my mission is accomplished! ⁵¹Do you think I've come with a nice little message of peace? No way. Believe me, my message will divide. ⁵²It will divide a household of five into three against two or two against three. ⁵³It will divide father against son and son against father; mother against daughter and daughter against mother; mother-in-law against daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law.

⁵⁴(speaking to the crowd) You see a cloud arise *from the sea* in the west, and you say, "Here comes a shower!" And you're right. ⁵⁵Or you feel the hot wind blowing in from *the desert in* the south and you say, "It's going to be really hot!" And you're right.

⁵⁶Listen hypocrites! You can predict the weather by paying attention to the sky and the earth, but why can't you interpret the urgency of this present moment? ⁵⁷Why don't you see it for yourselves?

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DD: For some, it seemed like any other Wednesday morning. People got up and dressed for work, headed off for appointments or for shopping or whatever. The sun shone brightly and the community looked absolutely verdant under its cleansing baptism of nightly rains and electrical storms. Some residents started on the chore of pumping out the basement from that gully washer of a torrent the night before with its gutter to gutter water running like a river down city streets. Early risers drove to work, opened the shop, prepared for customers, turned on the radio, listened for the local news.

What they heard surprised them. There were urgent calls for volunteers to report to City Hall. The city and the Red Cross joined hands to provide tools and transportation for all those many volunteers who came to shovel sand, barricade doorways with

thousands of sandbags. Sirens split the morning air as emergency vehicles raced along city streets. Police officers began cordoning off streets – Duff, Lincoln Way, 13th, Highway 30, Highway 69, Interstate 35... A rising sense of urgency began to grip the city. People flocked to grocery stores and gas stations, driving in ever-tightening circles as corridors between West and East Ames were severed by the rising flood waters. Residents of motels began leaving town and residents of mobile home parks began evacuating in twin processions of grim-faced drivers leaving something behind.

MJ: For some, the urgency became apparent as they were asked to evacuate their homes in the middle of the pouring rain as their streets and yards began to pool with water on Tuesday night. I had just laid down in bed when my phone rang. It was Kirk Brocker, director of the local Red Cross. They needed me to come open up the church so they could set up the church as an emergency shelter, and nine people, soaking wet, with nothing but the clothes on their back, spent the night in the fellowship hall because they had nowhere else to go.

Wednesday morning HIRTA buses filled with residents of Stonehaven showed up at the church seeking shelter, but because of the numbers of people and the warning of extreme heat, the shelter had to be moved to St. Cecelia Catholic church which is larger and air-conditioned. Our Administrative Assistant, Vicki Whitman, had been evacuated just before coming to work that morning. She lives in the mobile home park south of Best Buy and the waters were rising as she threw a suitcase in her car and tried to head to the church. Roads were closed everywhere she went and she couldn't go home. Finally, Mark Love took his pick-up (which is much higher off the ground than Vicki's Nissan), picked her up at the west HyVee, where she had stopped to find some cool, and somehow Mark got through the maze of water and barricades and dropped her off here three hours after she had left her home that morning.

DD: Indeed, the sun rose higher and heated up the town which began sweltering under the onslaught. The magnitude of the situation grew as more and more people began to recognize stores under water, whole areas lost to sight, Hilton flooded out, and the media began telling us that the waters were higher than in the Great Floods of '93, those floods of the century. But then, 1993 *was* last century.

We learned of teenagers swept away, some saved, one girl killed by the flood waters. We heard cautions and warnings about currents and the power of rising waters. We saw sofas and beds left out in front yards. Hundreds of people sweated in a race against the rising waters, filling sand bags and hauling them to stores, warehouses, motels; only to deal with the frustration of hearing the call and knowing the need but being unable to get from the sand to the site. One by one, the waters began winning the fight.

MJ: Then they turned the water off. It seemed more urgent to us all. We couldn't drink the water. They asked us not to use it. If we ignored the advice, we'd all not have water for longer time. Now we boil water, don't flush quite so often – in short – we live like most people in the developing world, conscious of water every day. Eight breaks in the lines have drained the water towers and we have grown thirsty.

It seemed so routine at first. But now some of us have soggy, ruined possessions to handle in homes no longer habitable and all the routines are lost.

Survival note of the week: **Recognize when things get urgent.**

DD: Laurence Gonzales, in his book, Deep Survival: Who Lives, Who Dies, and Why tells a story from ten years ago when three friends, all in their twenties, set out to climb Cathedral Peak in Yosemite, supposedly an easy climbⁱ. They were young, strong and eager for the adventure. They'd planned it, counted on it, looked forward to it. They awoke early to start the climb only to find that someone had stolen their food. They needed to be on the mountain by 8:00 a.m. to reach the summit by 1:00 p.m. But now they had to buy more food, which took two hours, so they started the climb late, tired, and hungry. Maybe they could make it to the top by 3:00. They'd driven too far not to try. They never considered shortening the trip.

The day was gorgeous with a forecast for clear weather. They did not bother with a weather radio or waterproof clothing. By mid-morning they were up and saw clouds moving in. Bad weather just didn't fit their plans so they disregarded the warning signs. It didn't seem urgent. The rain they began to see seemed far off, they could outrun it. It was routine. So they engaged the race with Mother Nature and she unleashed a series of stunning moves which included punishing hail, a lightning strike which so charged the mountain that the terrified climbers raced across the wet, slick rocks in a desperate search for shelter. Their cotton T-shirts turned a nasty cold breeze into a dangerous hypothermic wind as they clung to a nearly vertical rock wall while the storm slashed at them with hail, wind and rain. That's when the lightning struck them all, stunning them, leaving them hanging limply from their lines. Now, at last, it seemed urgent, very urgent indeed. They could have died up there, should have died, and it is only by luck and not skill that they were rescued at all.

Survival note of the week: **Recognize when things get urgent.**

MJ: Jesus recognized that things were urgent. All his life Jewish hatred against the dominating Roman Empire had become increasingly enflamed. The Jewish Zealots engaged in terrorist activities, assassinating Roman officials and soldiers whenever they could. They were calling on their people to rise up in armed rebellion against both Rome and the old order religion that had made peace with Roman domination and, in fact, allowed many Jewish leaders to profit at the expense of the Jews who struggled in poverty.

Jesus recognized that things were urgent. He was on a straight path to Jerusalem to take on the powers that be. Pontius Pilate and other Roman authorities had adopted increasingly harsh, repressive measures to stop the rebellion before it got out of control.

Jesus came proclaiming, "the Kingdom of God is at hand." This kind of rule is in stark contrast to either of these "might makes right" exercises of power over the other. Jesus preached power that gives itself for the sake of the other. Jesus' passion was that love would rule and that grace abound, that, as the prophet Micah said people would do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God.

That's the way of living Jesus was willing to die for. But all around him people drifted into lazy complacency or ignorant blindness of the situation that seemed so clear to him. To some, even to the Disciples who had been with him these three years, things seemed so overwhelming that it was enough to just help people feel good in the moment. They even fussed at Jesus when he spoke of suffering and dying.

DD: Finally Jesus burst out in frustration, "My mission is to send a purging fire on the earth! In fact, I can hardly wait to see the smoke rising." It's urgent. Fire gets people's attention. Fire levels the field. It gets everybody's attention. Fire forces us to recognize what's really important and what's really not so important after all. Fire gets us moving out of our complacency.

The people Jesus encountered didn't seem to feel the heat. Why couldn't they understand that the bastions of power: religious and governmental are not the final authority; armed rebellion doesn't make things right. Why couldn't they see with new eyes that the way of life is in serving not being served, that it's in forgiving without keeping count, that it's in giving more than you take, that the power generated belongs to us all and not to a select few. It's abundance. It's joyous. It's eternal.

Of course, it's not like that now. There's not clashing displays of power in our world. We don't have terrorists trying to rise up against governing power. We don't have governing power clamping down. We don't have those who benefit at the cost of others. And in our world, people are always doing justice, loving kindness and walking humbly with God, so there is no more need for such purging fire as Jesus cries out for. We can all relax. There is no urgency. The weather is fine. The creeks are not rising. Life is good.

Colleen: We better stop, hey, what's that sound
Everybody look what's going down

ⁱ Laurence Gonzales, Deep Survival: Who Lives, Who Dies, and Why (W.W. Norton, New York, NY 2003) p. 83 ff.