



Saltwater damaged trucks in lot that flooded after Katrina
New Orleans, LA
Photo by P.I.M.C.

APPENDIX 3: SERMON

JESSICA CHADWICK, UTS AND CUSSW

A SERMON PREACHED ON RETURN FROM THE TRIP.

“The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me; because the Lord has anointed me to bring good tidings to the afflicted; he has sent me to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release of the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor... They shall build up the ancient ruins, they shall raise up the former devastations; they shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations... I will make an everlasting covenant with them.” (Isaiah 61)

“LET THIS HOUSE STAND” “DO NOT TEAR DOWN” “WHERE IS FEMA?”

“WE’RE COMING BACK” “TWO PEOPLE FOUND HERE” “DESTROY THIS HOUSE”

These are some of the signs painted on what remains of houses in neighborhoods affected by Hurricanes Katrina, Rita and Wilma. Spray painted on fronts of houses. Houses without roofs, without furniture, without people. Some houses had been moved off their foundations and moved to other neighborhoods. And some houses, luckily, are standing.

The devastation we witnessed was astonishing. The stories we heard were intense. It is difficult even to describe the experience. We heard stories of survival and stories of death; stories about God’s mercy and about God’s will. We heard conspiracy theories and thoughts of thankfulness for government aid.

But the need to rebuild was the theme that tied our trip together as we traveled. Some people we met had already begun this process, like the Ashbakers in Ocean Springs, who

were cleaning up debris from the storm surge that swept away all but the foundation of their house. And like Mr. Morgan, a 78-year old African-American man from New Orleans, whose house had been flooded and was now filled with mold. Others, like many of the residents of the Lower Ninth Ward, had not even returned to assess the damage. But for everyone, the question was, "How will we rebuild?"

In today's reading from Isaiah, the prophet brings God's word to the people of Jerusalem, instructing them how to rebuild their destroyed city. Surely many passionate ideas and conversations were floating through the minds and lips of the Israelite people at the time. Many questions: Who exactly was to blame for the destruction? What of God's protection and God's covenant? How shall the city be rebuilt?

Jerusalem was a holy city; the mountain where God resided - Mt. Zion. And the Israelites were a holy people with whom God had made a holy covenant, an everlasting covenant, a promise of protection in exchange for worship, justice and service. And although the Israelite people had faltered many times in upholding their end of the deal, God had always remained faithful. That is, until the Babylonian army showed up. Now many empires had dominated the city of Jerusalem. Yet, nothing caused as much destruction and damage as the exile that occurred under the leadership of the Babylonian Empire.

A people in exile, refugees in their own land. Can't you just hear people asking why God had forsaken them? Can't you just hear the debates of blame? Was the Babylonian army solely to blame or was this God's doing? Some prophets cited the lack of faithfulness among the Israelites as the cause for God's wrath, which in turn caused the destruction. Was it the fault of the Israelite leaders? Should they have been prepared and provided more substantial, punctual relief to the exiled people?

After years of exile the Persian Emperor permitted the Israelites to return home to begin the rebuilding process. And so the questions, "Who will return home? Which

neighborhoods will be rebuilt and which will remain devastated? Will there be enough resources, jobs, schools, houses of worship in the city to sustain the population that existed before the destruction. Will the covenant with God be re-established? Like the Ashbakers and Mr. Morgan, the people of Jerusalem were ready to pick up the tools and get to work – ready to begin the clean-up process. But how? What should the city look like?

In Mr. Morgan's house, rebuilding began with destroying. I was with a group of students who went to help Mr. Morgan gut the basement of his house. The house had severe flood damage inside; the drywall, the insulation, the floorboards – everything was moldy. It was so moldy, in fact, that we were not permitted to enter without suits, goggles, and masks covering every part of our body. We tore out nail after nail, brought down board after board, ripped out pieces of this man's life, so it seemed, and we called it rebuilding.

This is not so different from Isaiah's directive to rebuild. The prophet preaches that the barriers of society must be torn down, that the walls of separation must no longer exist. He preaches good news to the oppressed, words of liberty, release, comfort, repair, justice and promise. Isaiah writes that God requires a new community - a community of justice. We discern that God is speaking to those who have experienced the destruction of their homes as well as the oppressions of poverty and captivity. We hear God declare that the rebuilt community must include justice. A new community must be built on solid rock and not on sinking sand.

This is true of the Gulf region as well. We've heard various debates these past few months. Not only about blame, but also about what to do now – whose responsibility is it to rebuild. If we heed Isaiah's advice, we will not build tourist attractions (casinos) to increase revenue, but communities to increase justice. We will be concerned about the racial and socio-economic composition of the Gulf region. God tells us what things to be

concerned about — affordable housing and the input of minority and poor communities in rebuilding efforts. These are what would please the Lord, according to the prophet.

By now the flood waters have receded, some supplies and resources (though certainly not enough) have arrived; the people who survived have begun to return to their homes, or what's left of them. And there is hope in Mississippi and New Orleans. Within that hope there is the ever-present question, "How will we rebuild?" That question comes up in political debates, in the media, in the hearts and minds of the victims of the disaster. We heard story after story of how people were tired of the blame-game debates. They are ready to move on. But how?

The Gulf Coast region is not the only place struggling with building community, justice and a renewed covenant with God. The region affected by the tsunami of last year, the wild fires and mudslides of California, the tornados in the Midwest, the recent mud slides of the Philippines, the mining disasters in West Virginia, the many countries affected by war and violence and genocide and poverty, by oppression, tyranny, and colonialism. There are many communities and neighborhoods in the world that are asking the questions that the Israelites asked so long ago - questions that doubt God's will and protection. And when the time comes, they ask questions about how to rebuild.

It can seem overwhelming. What can the people in our church do to help these communities in the rebuilding process in the way that Isaiah has described? Rebuilding, focused on community, compassion and justice? I believe it begins with us, here. By building our own community based on the values that Isaiah describes - liberty, justice, compassion. This church, this community, this town can become a model of what God's covenant to rebuild can look like. But we must not stop there; we must also stand up and attempt to influence the rebuilding processes in this country and beyond. And we must influence the rebuilding processes in neighborhoods that have been destroyed by

the disasters of poverty and oppression in near-by neighborhoods. As bearers of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, with the promise of an everlasting covenant, it is our responsibility and privilege to continually preach about the covenant of community and justice that God demands.



Ocean Spring, MS
Photo by E.C.

TALLU SCHUYLER, UTS

“WHAT IS NATURAL ABOUT IT?”

I just finished cooking burritos and fajitas for fifty. Cooking for large groups of people is a skill I have to offer these movers and shakers. Sometimes I am struck silent by the talents of the others on this trip for organizing and mobilizing and analyzing and theorizing and explicating and remembering statistics. I figure one thing I can offer is to cook for them – provide a healthy meal.

And I can offer my feelings. I’ll jot a few down. I remember on Thanksgiving in New York, my father paid the full, suggested donation at the Museum of Natural History and the total tab was a hefty \$80 dollars for four of us. I said to him, “Papa, I don’t want you to pay that much! We don’t need to pay that much.” He gently asked me whether or not I felt it is our duty to pay the full amount for others who cannot. His response to me was simple and profound. This set me thinking...

It is, of course, socialism on a basic level. I love my Papa for so many reasons, one of them being this gentle reminder that it matters what we do with our money.

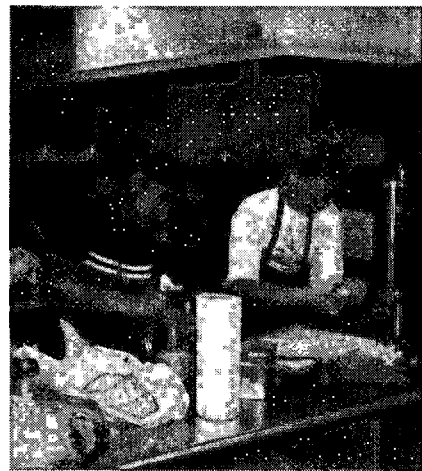
We are on this trip to explore the ramifications of this natural disaster, but the more questions I ask and the more answers I receive, the more it becomes obvious that there is more to this disaster than just the hurricane. The disaster already existed before the storm hit and before the levees broke. The disaster is and has been deeply rooted in the blatant and systematic oppression of the

poor, the working class. This disaster doesn’t exist only along the Gulf Coast, but all across this country. Lack of affordable housing, lack of legislation calling for a living wage, lack of adequate health care, lack of laws to protect all people, lack of politics that truly represents the people – these are the disasters. This is THE disaster. What is natural about it?

As someone who wants to be in ministry committed to social justice on local and national levels, I am immersed in this experience and wondering why faith communities want only to respond to a disaster like Katrina or Ivan or Rita, when a disaster exists for millions of people in our country who are devastated all the time, every single day. How can we get our communities of faith to situate their ministries in ending the systems that oppress poor people, rather than cleaning up after the death that oppression delivers?

What does it mean to have no home? What does it mean to be home-less? These problems we are exploring are so big. They are so huge and where do I enter in? Where will I find my work within this movement? Do I focus on health care, welfare, prison reform, environmental racism, policy writing, advocating for voting rights, teaching, childcare, youth work, domestic violence, affordable housing, chaplaincy – where? I am so small. And while I feel small, I also feel important. It is important to ask these questions. And it was important to make that meal.

I go to bed wondering how I can live a life committed to doing this work. And I pray.



Pakhi Sengupta and Tallu Schulyer
preparing dinner
Pensacola, FL
Photograph by C.W-M.

INTRODUCTION

CHAPTER 1

On August 28, 2005, Hurricane Katrina made landfall on the Louisiana Coast. Possibly the largest hurricane of its force ever recorded, it devastated much of the coastline of Louisiana and Mississippi and its winds damaged parts of Alabama. While initial reports indicated limited damage in New Orleans, subsequently the storm surge breached the levee system that separated New Orleans from Lake Pontchartrain, and waters quickly flooded 80 to 90 percent of the city, much of which is below sea level.

As many as 1,400 lives were lost in the storm and more than 3,000 people are missing. Over 200,000 homes were destroyed and up to 1.5 million people were displaced - an unspeakable humanitarian tragedy.

In the next week, students began to gather at the Union Theological Seminary to begin the 2005-06 academic year and immediately began considering how they could answer the inner call to respond to the tragedy.

We must respond as when a child is hurt we rush to hold the child, and when friends are in mourning, the heart cries out to be with them, in love, to share their grief, to pray with them, to affirm that they are not alone. Though for most of us the hurricane's victims