

'Disaster Preparedness' Sermon first preached by Dr Christine Hoffman at FUMC Palmetto, 13th September 2009

Our Old Testament Scripture this morning came from the Book of Proverbs. Over the past few months Wendy's Sunday School Class has looked in some detail at this book. They have discussed the wise sayings of Proverbs and considered how they might be heeded today. Key to the thinking of the Book of Proverbs is the refrain that 'The fear of the LORD is the beginning of Wisdom, that is true wisdom lies not in a sniveling terror before God, but in a right relationship with God. This involves awe, a respect, and obedience to the one who has created the universe and who is in control of his purposes for it. This morning, we've heard part of the opening chapter of the Book of Proverbs and there Wisdom is personified. She appears as Lady Wisdom, a street preacher. But do we like what she has to say? I'm not sure that I like her tone when she says she will laugh when calamity strikes those who have ignored her counsel. To me, this sounds a bit like someone gloating when you or I suffer some personal calamity about which we had been warned, saying: 'I told you so.'

Neither is the content of what Lady Wisdom says immediately appealing. It is counter-cultural. She is not concerned with the good life, in the sense of prosperity and success. We in the church sometimes wonder why comparatively few are interested in living God's ways, but perhaps we shouldn't be surprised that many are not hungry for God's word to humankind. What Lady Wisdom offers is, if like, an all-you-can-eat buffet prepared for those who have already eaten. Anyone after knowledge in the sense of power will have no room for the Wisdom God offers. Perhaps we are a bit put off by this 'I would listen to me if I were you' representative of God, as portrayed her in Lady Wisdom. But I think she is trying to shock us into heeding her fundamental insistence that 'the fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge'. What she offers is a sort of Disaster Preparedness.

And anyone living in Florida tends to know about Disaster Preparedness. Google 'Disaster Preparedness' on the internet and there is no shortage of information and advice. When I looked the other day, I found, for instance: A Citizen's Guide to Disaster Preparedness; Disaster Preparedness for pets, for horses, for livestock. (These must all be very clever animals to read these websites.) Soon after I arrived on the Gulf Coast in 2006, I went, with a number from our congregation, to Disaster Response Training in Bradenton I've been on the course. I've even got the T-shirt. Here it is! But, wait a minute, my little badge from that occasion tells me that my qualification has already expired. Expires 01/09. Actually, what it actually says is: 'Christine Hoffman – volunteer – expires 01/09! That date has already been and gone and fortunately I didn't expire. But, sure enough, my training is out-of-date. As with our responding to any personal disaster, our training, if it is to be truly based in awe, respect, and obedience towards God, needs regular updating. We can't say: 'Well, I've done it once and that's enough to draw on for the rest of my life.'

Do you know, I'm not sure I ever really grasped what it was to be ready for a natural disaster. I recall that during the summer of 2006, not long after this training, a tropical storm in the Gulf was upgraded to a hurricane and I became quite mesmerized by the tracking of this approaching hurricane as it was continually shown on television. I had only just finished unpacking all my stuff from Britain: which included furniture, clothing, and lots of music CDs. And there was a lot of stuff. Just ask Michelle Jurgensen's son, who so kindly helped us unload from the truck which arrived at the parsonage on the last leg of the shipping journey from England! But was I truly prepared, should this hurricane hit our area? I don't think so. Rather, I was more paralyzed by the thought that all this stuff, together with all the stuff from Stephen's previous home in Daytona Beach, might get washed away any day soon. Sitting in front of the TV for predictions of the hurricane wasn't really Disaster Preparedness. It did no good at all. Rather, it just served to increase in me a dread of disaster.

It is all too easy to feel such a paralyzing dread in relation to more personal disasters. Instead of taking steps to be prepared, mentally, emotionally, and most of all spiritually for whatever challenge comes our way, we can become obsessed with looking on the horizon for an approaching storm. We're so busy tracking that we're not preparing ourselves by living each day in awe of God, each day in total dependence of God, each day reliant on God's grace. It is not for anyone of us to tell someone else that everything is going to turn out just fine in his or her situation; for it may not. Nor is it necessarily helpful for someone else to give me such false optimism. The diagnosis may not be what I want to hear.

Our opening hymn this morning: 'Mothering God', was based on words by the 15th century mystic, Julian of Norwich, including the most famous of her words: 'All will be well; and all manner of things will be well.' What can she possibly have meant? It surely cannot be that everything will turn out just fine in terms of our chosen outcome to every situation. Our health, our family, our job will always be strong and secure. Try telling that today to anyone knocked sideways by recent loss.

And what about Jesus' words that 'those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life' for his sake 'will save it'. This cannot mean simply that all will turn out just fine for every follower of Jesus, in particular that no-one will die. No every single one of us will die. Apart from having been born, it's the only thing we all have in common. And let's remember that Jesus too died. He did lose his life. Crucifixion was surely not his chosen outcome, not if his prayers in the Garden of Gethsemane are anything to go by.

No, Julian's 'All will be well' must be something different from cheap optimism. And Lady Wisdom's living 'without dread of disaster' must be more than whistling in the dark. The outlook is more akin to what Jesus said about being rooted in trust in God rather than spending our energy in anxiety. In the Sermon on the Mount, you remember, he says: 'Do not worry about tomorrow', and then he adds, 'for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today.' I often think this isn't very consoling, but then I don't think Jesus is trying to be consoling, not in the sense that some

people try to be when they tell us not to worry about how things are going to turn out just fine. No, I think Jesus is being realistic about what it is to live one day at a time, doing what we can and leaving the rest to God. I think he is saying something about cultivating an attitude of disaster preparedness, of providing the spiritual equivalents of window-shutters and sandbags to face disaster when it comes.

Jesus and Lady Wisdom in our Old Testament reading this morning are surely not gloating over people's downfall but rather promising a certain peace of those who listen to them. This listening always involves obedience and 'obedience is participation in the practices that lead to wisdom: hearing and reading Scripture, prayers of confession and intercession, humility before others and God. This wisdom has very little to do with knowledge in service of power, and more to do with insight that is in service of God and neighbor. In an insecure world, this wisdom is grounded in the voice of God, calling us into the way that leads to life. This wisdom is present among those who live in communion with God's people. ... wisdom is finally possible as we participate in the practices of the God who is wisdom.' ¹ One thing worth remembering as we try to pursue the outlook that Lady Wisdom recommends is that we cannot tell anyone else to live 'without dread of disaster'. A deep belief that 'All will be well', in the sense that Julian of Norwich means, it can only be acquired by each of us individually. Losing a dread of disaster and living secure in God's love is not something any of us can experience second-hand. No-one else can find this conviction for us. Nor can we find this Wisdom, centered in the fear of the LORD for someone else. Each of us has to participate in this sort of disaster preparedness.

We are approaching the Jewish High Holy Days. This Friday begins a New Year in the Jewish Faith and ten days later comes the holiest day of all, the Day of Atonement. One of the prayers that is recited at the beginning of all Jewish festivals is called the 'Sheheheyanu'. 'Sheheheyanu' is the opening word of this prayer in Hebrew. It means 'who has kept us alive', so God is blessed for having kept us alive, for having brought us to this particular moment. The prayer says: 'Blessed are You, Lord our God, who has kept us in life, has sustained us, and has permitted us to reach this moment.' This blessing is recited not just at festivals but at other particular moments of celebration, for instance on completing a new house and taking possession. A Jew does not then bless God for the place but for the moment.

Last Rosh Hoshanah I made a brief phone call to a Jewish friend of mine, Clive Stein, now living in London. For many years, he and his wife, June, lived quite near me in Canterbury and I enjoyed their friendship. Already, by the time Stephen got chance to meet June and Clive, June was terminally ill. We were delighted that she was well enough to join in our marriage celebrations, but the year after, I received a phone call to the parsonage in Palmetto from Clive telling me that June had died. All was not well with June in the sense that she would not get very sick or that she was not dying. But, one of my most vivid memories of June was of her suddenly reciting the Sheheheyanu in the living room of my brand new home of 1998, near Canterbury. At that point, they themselves had moved back to London to be near grandchildren, but June still had some

¹ Kenneth H Carter in *Feasting on the Word*, Westminster John Knox Press, 2009, p 52

Justice of the Peace responsibilities in Canterbury and so used to stay overnight with me from time to time. On one such occasion, I ask her if she could help me place the underlay for my two Turkish rugs and then the rugs themselves. It was a job more easily undertaken by two people than by one. Well, June didn't just help me, she made an occasion of it, joyously blessing God that I had made it to this point of putting down these Turkish rugs in my new home. Remember her words: 'Blessed are You, Lord our God, who has kept us in life, has sustained us, and has permitted us to reach this moment.' I remember with great amusement and affection June's articulating this approach to life. These two rugs are soon to be lifted up from the carpet in our parsonage and put down again on new carpet. I hope that as we re-lay them, Stephen and I will have the same attitude to life as June Stein and bless God for keeping us in life, sustaining us, and permitting us to reach this moment. I hope that we all can cultivate this approach to life, so that in apparent disaster, even at the point of our death, we can say and truly mean the words of the Sheheyanu: 'Blessed are You, Lord our God, who has kept u in life, has sustained us, and has permitted us to reach this moment.'

I'd like to tell you briefly another friend in Canterbury. We saw this lady, Pauline Snell and her husband, Colin when we were over in the UK this past May. She told me then that she was suffering from a serious condition. Besides sad, she was also angry because she had sought help for this condition for about a year and it had been misdiagnosed. She feared that by now it was too late for treatment. Sure enough, the last few emails we received from her husband have described her final days. Her memorial service is in Canterbury Methodist Church this coming Thursday. Would any of us dream of sending a message to her husband saying: 'This isn't really disastrous for you; all is well.' No, but to him and to ourselves in our time of disaster, we might try getting a handle on what Julian of Norwich meant by saying 'all will be well and all things will be well.' And, every day, even when things are clearly going well, we might try living without dread of disaster, clinging on to love. This love, says Julian, is what endures – in life and in death. She was surely talking about God's eternal loving purpose for his creation and each member of this creation. I would like to conclude with an extract from Julian's book 'All Will Be Well':

We are guided in this transitory life
by God our Father
who is endless day.
In this light, Christ our Mother and the Holy Spirit
conduct us.
God shines forth this light with providence,
making it available to us
in the nighttime of our need.
The light makes possible our life.
Our pain and sorrow derive from the night.
But God is with us even in dejection,
for we believe in the light
thanks to his mercy and grace,
and we walk in it

with wisdom and strength.

At sorrow's end
our eyes will be opened;
we shall see clearly
that the light shines with fullness;
for this light is our God
shining through Jesus our Saviour.

This light is charity,
and God's wisdom measures it out
for our well being.

It is not yet bright enough
for us to see the day of our happiness,
nor is it completely hidden from us.

But it is a light
in which we can profitably live
and strive to receive the everlasting glory of God.

So faith and hope
lead us to love
and in the end,
all will be love.