

Partners in Compassion

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Prayer of the Day, Ps.51:1-10

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I spent a good deal of time this past week making efforts to contact members of Our Saviour Lutheran Church in Freeport, Grand Bahama to see how they have been faring after that category 5 hurricane sat over their island for two days right after Labor Day. You may remember my mentioning that I served that congregation as their interim pastor from 2004 to 2006. So I know the island, and I know the people. And my heart certainly went out to them as we all watched the weather reports closely while Hurricane Dorian was threatening us. We got lucky here in Spring Hill – it passed us by. But the islands of Abaco and Grand Bahama took a direct hit.

I don't doubt that you've seen the pictures and video of the catastrophic damage in Marsh Harbor on Abaco, where there's little left but rubble and piles of shattered homes as far as the eye can see. These are dramatic images that have captured the world's attention and the attention of the news media. It took more effort on my part to find out what happened on Grand Bahama island and in Freeport in particular.

The good news is that all the members of Our Saviour Lutheran Church are alright. None died, although many sustained damage or loss in one form or another.

Greg Smith, who was president of the congregation when I served there, told me on Monday, "Saying that we're doing okay is relative," he told me. "The misery index is at an all-time high."

He spoke of one lady at church with three kids who had to evacuate. "She lost everything," Greg said. So did another member who owned a Nike Store in the downtown area.

Yet another member lost her car as she retreated to the third floor of her apartment building to escape the rising waters. She was fortunate. Neighborly people took her it.

Greg's elderly aunt was not so fortunate. When the waters rose, she scrambled onto the roof of her house, and then lost balance and fell into the surge waters and was swept out to sea.

There are lots of similar stories of people being washed away like that, including children. While standing in line to get drinking water after the storm, Greg met a man who lost nine family members to the flood waters.

People have simply been in shock ever since the storm hit.

Our Saviour member Gena Granger, the treasurer of the congregation, told me that the waters came up "in a matter of 10 minutes" and caught many people by surprise. "It was worse than Frances, worse than Jeanne" – two hurricanes that hit there three weeks apart in 2004. "This one was devastating," she said. And yet for all the ferocity of the

winds, it was the water that was “life-changing,” she said. “It just plowed through” from the northern coast where the airport is located. “The airport always floods since it’s right on the water,” she reminded me. But this time the water surged past the airport and went a good three miles inland – on an island that is only 5.5 miles from north to south. The surge covered some homes with as much as 20 feet of water and flooded the downtown business district with about 10 feet of water.

“It came all the way down to Sunrise Blvd,” she said, which is the east-west main road that the church sits on. “It had never done that before.”

For all of that, however, the church had no appreciable damage except a sign out by the road. They were lucky to have replaced their original 1967 wood roof with a new metal one just three years ago. “If we hadn’t,” said Greg Smith, “it would likely have been a different story.”

The roof over the offices and classrooms held firm also, after it was replaced from damage done by the two hurricanes in 2004 when I was their pastor. “But we can see some stress points in the building that will need addressing,” Gena said.

That’s probably the case all around, I would expect. She said that she has 4x10 inch beams on her condo that were cracked. “Obviously from the roof trying to come off,” she said. What a frightening thought.

Greg and Brenda Smith have a hole in their roof over the family room, which was completely water-soaked from rain coming in for the whole time that the hurricane was stalled over their heads. That means not only wet furniture and belongings to deal with in the aftermath, but mold growing in walls and attics throughout the island. Pictures from Grand Bahama that I’ve seen show whole neighborhoods with furniture, clothing and personal items spread out on everyone’s lawn in an effort to dry them out. The worst of the lot are piled up by the streets for hauling away.

So widespread is the water damage across the island that it creates a hazard for reconnecting homes to the power grid. “Every house that is flooded has to be inspected before they can turn electric back on,” Gena told me. “We’re talking hundreds of homes.” What a process.

There was no power anywhere when I talked to Greg and member Janet Albury-Simpson on Monday, a week after the storm hit. By Thursday when I spoke with Gena, she had gotten power, but the water system was still down.

“Salt water got into the water storage tanks” of the city, she told me. “So you can’t drink the water. You can’t wash with it either until they give the all clear.”

The lack of power and lack of water for drinking, washing and bathing has made the whole populace reliant on donations of food and water. Freeport is the second most populated city in the Bahamas with about 30,000 people, with another 20,000 being spread elsewhere on the island. That’s a lot of people to try to feed and provide potable water for.

Fortunately, many of the cruise lines that regularly stop at Freeport are bringing in quantities of food and water – and then in turn taking a lot of people off the island.

“Many people are leaving Freeport,” said Our Saviour’s pastor, Clifford Lewis. “Some saying that they will never return.” I don’t doubt it.

Because Our Saviour’s church building was spared, Pastor Lewis was able to gather his flock last Sunday following the storm. About 30 people gathered, which was a little smaller group than the usual 40-50 that is the average. Since the power was out and

the sanctuary was dark, they met in the open courtyard in front of the main entrance. They sang a hymn, said a prayer and heard readings from scripture. And then Pastor Lewis invited the people to share their experience of the storm and what they were feeling. That conversation went on for more than an hour and a half. Communion followed, and then the final hymn, whose refrain was this:

“No storm can shake my inmost calm while to that Rock I’m clinging.
Since Christ is Lord of Heaven and Earth, how can I keep from singing.” (ELW 763)

“It was cathartic,” Greg Smith told me. So many raw emotions. So many hurt people. So many stories of tragedy and loss and near escape. So much grief across that church membership and across that island.

In our Prayer of the Day that opened our service, we addressed God as “overflowing with mercy and compassion” and asked that he “preserve your people in your loving care.” Similarly, our Psalm for today spoke of God having “steadfast love.”

We all know and believe this about God. And we all know and believe that God is surely in those places where he is most needed at any given time or place. So it is we believe for the people of Our Saviour and the people in the Bahamas.

But God calls us to more than just belief of this sort. God calls us to be PARTNERS in that “overflowing mercy and compassion,” PARTNERS in helping to “preserve God’s people in his loving care.” The good people of Our Saviour, Freeport are our brothers and sisters in the faith. They have names known to God, known to me, and now, through my telling, known to you.

Interestingly enough, our Church Council talked about this situation last Tuesday at our regular monthly meeting and decided to invite donations to help out our brothers and sisters in the Bahamas by sending funds into Our Saviour. Not ten minutes after that meeting ended, I was in my office discussing some matters with Liz Weinhold, when a woman came in off the street – completely unknown to us – and asked if we were taking donations for the Bahamas. She said that she had called the local Red Cross, and they had told her to go to Holy Cross. We were on a list as taking donations for the Bahamas.

I don’t know how that happened. I can’t explain it. But then we’ve seen a lot of unexpected things happening around here in recent years, so why she we be surprised?! It is just another sign of God’s blessing, is it not?

And is this not who we are – a congregation that helps others even as we help ourselves? It’s part of our church history. It’s in our DNA. We are that kind of congregation. We are that kind of people. We are partners with God in mercy, compassion and loving care.

May it always be so among us. And may God bless us so that we may BE a blessing to others.