

If you know anything about Florida, then you know that Florida has a rainy season from June 1<sup>st</sup> to November 1<sup>st</sup>. During that time frame, we don't just a regular dose of rain, but especially in the August-October timeframe, something called hurricanes. We usually have a warning that one is coming, so we prepare. We load up on bottled water. We make sure we have batteries for our flashlights. We fill our bathtubs with water, to be able to flush our toilets, do dishes, or wash our hands, if the power goes out. We remove furniture or secure it on our bird cages or porches. If we live in a modular home or trailer, we try to go over to someone's home with a block and stucco, that can better handle the large scale winds. If a hurricane is a category 4 or 5, we might flee the state, even if we are seemingly safe, living in the middle of the state of Florida.

Most of us Floridians have lived through a hurricane. Almost all of us have lived through severe storms. The sky grows dark and cloudy. The wind begins to howl. Palm fronds are in the road. The rain comes down like holy buckets. There are pools of water in low lying areas. The electric lines shiver and shake. Then emergency vehicles dart up and down the streets. We know that we're stuck in a bad place—a very bad place!

Lent begins today with Ash Wednesday and with it, we begin a sermon series called Places of the Passion. Using Matthew's gospel, we will walk with Jesus to places like the Upper Room, the Garden of Gethsemane, Pilate's Judgment Hall and the hill of Golgotha. The places of the Passion! Today we walk with Jesus to the city of Jerusalem.

“When Jesus had finished all these sayings, he said to his disciples ...” (Matthew 26:1) Matthew records five teaching blocks of Jesus, patterning his gospel after the Pentateuch—the first five books in the Old Testament. Five times Matthew writes, “When Jesus had finished all these sayings ...” (Matthew 7:28; 11:1; 13:53; 19:1; 26:1). Matthew 26:1 is the fifth and final time Matthew writes, “When Jesus had finished all these sayings ...”

What's the point? Matthew is finishing his gospel. He's wrapping things up. It's all coming to an end. And it will end with a massive storm. The sky is growing dark and cloudy. The wind is beginning to howl. Soon the rain will be coming down like holy buckets. How so?

“He said to his disciples, ‘You know that after two days the Passover is coming, and the Son of Man will be delivered up to be crucified.’ (Matthew 26:1–2) This will be Christ's last Passover in Jerusalem. He is about to be crucified, dead and buried. Jesus is stuck in a bad place—a very bad place with a storm ready to hit!

We all know what it feels like to be stuck in a vulnerable, exposed place when a storm hits. Are you taking care of a family member? Did you lose the love of your life? What about your health? Is old age getting the best of you? Has a doctor used the “C” word with you? Cancer?

Does anyone remember a soap opera called Secret Storm? A secret storm is the worst kind of storm because we feel so all alone. It's a secret storm because we're so ashamed and so embarrassed and so afraid that we don't tell a soul.

Most of life's storms come and go. There's another kind of storm that comes, but it never goes. It hammers and hounds. It brings with it hell and high water. Thunder roars. Lightning zig zags across the sky. What am I talking about? It's the storm called sin. Sin comes and it never goes. What does sin look like?

"Then the chief priests and the elders of the people gathered in the palace of the high priest, whose name was Caiaphas, and plotted together in order to arrest Jesus by stealth and kill him. But they said, 'Not during the feast, lest there be an uproar among the people.'" (Matthew 26:3-5)

Joseph Caiaphas is the high priest. He held the office from 18-36 AD, far longer than anyone else in this era—indicating his skill and political shrewdness. Caiaphas knows that a public arrest of Jesus will be very risky. There would most certainly be an uproar among the people because they believed Jesus was a mighty prophet. Caiaphas couldn't have Christ killed during the Passover feast, but he couldn't wait until after Passover because then Jesus would probably leave Jerusalem and go back to Galilee—and escape again!

Why are the chief priest and elders plotting to kill Jesus? They were losing their place! They had the most important places in the synagogue and in the marketplace. They wore long tassels. They gave a tenth of their possessions. They fasted twice a week. They prayed long prayers. They could take their esteemed place in the community and thank God that they were not in the place of the other people—tax collectors and sinners. The chief priests and elders had a place of power and respect—until Christ came.

Christ's ministry attracted crowds. His words touched hearts. His hands opened eyes. His presence brought about a life that was full of grace and truth. Then what happened? The chief priests and elders began to lose their place. That's why they gathered to plot and prepare for Christ's death.

Do you see what sin is? Sin is holding on to my place. Sin is not allowing Christ first place. And sin is making sure others stay in their place! We're not that much different from the chief priests and elders. Eventually sin brings with it hurricane winds and life-threatening lightning that destroys everything!

What is Christ's response to our sin? Does he condemn us? Does he lock us up and throw away the key? Do you remember what Jesus says in Matthew 26:2? "You know that after two days the Passover is coming, and the Son of Man will be delivered up to be crucified." Jesus walks to a place called Golgotha—the Place of the Skull. At Golgotha, Jesus walks into the storm. In 2 Corinthians 5:19 Paul writes, "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself." What does that look like?

Jesus willingly places himself in the middle of the storm—The Cat 5 or all Cat 5's! Listen. Can you hear him? "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." (Luke 23:34) "Today you will be with me in paradise." (Luke 23:43) "I thirst." (John 19:28) "It is finished!" (John 19:30)

Are you stuck in a bad place? Jesus was stuck in a bad place. Are you hurting? Jesus hurt. Are you bleeding? Jesus bled. Do you feel like you're gasping for air? Jesus gasped for air.

Are you crying? Jesus cried. Is your heart breaking? Jesus' heart was absolutely broken. What's it all mean? It means we are not alone in the storm. We are never alone in our storm!

To the father haunted by his angry outbursts, Jesus speaks. To the husband and wife who barely talk to each other, Jesus speaks. To all of us exposed to the constant storm of sin, Jesus speaks. Listen. Can you hear him? What does he say? "I love you!"

What should we do when we're stuck in a bad place—a massive, life-threatening Category Five kind-of-storm? When it looks as though everything is going to be wiped off the map? Should we panic? Pout? Pretend? Should we freak out? Have our nineteenth nervous breakdown? Do something we'll regret for the rest of our life? No. No. And No.

God knows how to get his people safely through the storm. Isn't that the message of Passover? God doing whatever it takes to get Israel safely through their unpredictable, ferocious and hellish storm called Egypt. There was the Pharaoh with his whips and bricks and bag of tricks. There was the Red Sea which looked like a dead end. And then there were the horses and chariots! What happened? Israelites walked through the Red Sea on dry ground!

God knows how to get his people safely through the storm. Isn't that the message of Christ's Passover meal as well? With his true body and blood, Jesus takes us from a stormy place to another place. A place of peace in his presence; a place to lay our burdens down; a place to receive forgiveness and be made new. Jesus has reserved your place—a place at his table—just for you! Amen.