

Chapter One

You Are All Wet, God!

I grew up in Houston. Hurricanes were semi-annual events during my childhood and adolescence back in the 70s and 80s. Large culverts, or bayous, run throughout the city. The intent of these civil engineering initiatives was to decrease flooding as such flooding was to be expected. On numerous occasions our pet dog, a black Labrador retriever, swam off our front porch into the flood waters. Nicholas, our dog's name, clearly enjoyed these weather events. My neighbors did too. Some neighbors even took their canoes for a paddle down the center of our street.

However, Hurricane Harvey was different. One reason this hurricane hurt Houston so badly was that Houston itself had changed a lot in 40 years. Back in my childhood, Houston sported a population of about two million people. By 2017, greater Houston hosted seven million people. Apparently, there was a city ordinance that required every human person to sponsor 10 tons of poured concrete. Ok, there was no such ordinance, but the concrete flooded the fields before the waters of Harvey flooded the fields. Too much concrete means too little water being absorbed into the ground. The result? Houston's biggest flood event.

While a vigorous and sustained population growth correlated with the hardening of the landscape, Harvey itself had unique characteristics that caused it to deliver such a wallop. I'm no meteorologist, however, the local TV weather reporters repeatedly noted that the rotating movement usually brings the hurricane to move inland. Once inland, the hurricane is starved of the waters of the Gulf of Mexico. With the water turned off, the hurricane dissipates once it is rotating above dry ground. However, Harvey did not so proceed. Rather, this guy chose to sit on top of the fourth largest city in America for about a week. With little movement inland, Harvey was able to keep slurping up the waters of the Gulf and was therefore, also able to continue to dump those waters all over the greater Houston area.

God blessed, and The Family of Faith Church facilities remained dry. This was so rare that people who were flooded out of their homes discovered our dry location and soon were camping in the church gym. When I say camping, I mean that each family intuited that they should locate one of the electrical outlets that were positioned around the perimeter of the gym. The electric outlets acted like campfires. Around these little campfires, the families huddled while charging their phones. Yes, the family pets were part of the huddle. Yes, the pets did mark their territory in the church gym on more than one occasion. The circumstances caused by the rain were a big mess in many ways.

As the rain kept raining down, more and more people drove their cars off the main road and into our church parking lot. The drivers would park and then realize there was nowhere to go. All the roads in all directions were flooded. Upon realizing they were stranded, these

motorists walked across the church parking lot and approached the church for help. I clearly remember one young adult who stepped into the welcome area. She noted to me that she just needed to give her parents directions to our church and then her parents would take her here on her way. After using our cell phones to consider numerous paths, it became apparent that no matter what set of directions we provided her parents, all routes were underwater. She would need to join the other campers in the gym. She was very surprised and frustrated by the reality of her predicament. If she had something to say to God, it would probably have sounded like this: "You are all wet, God!"

The waters did recede. The campers did leave to reoccupy their various dwellings. The local superintendent of the public schools would later describe the response of people in need as having a choice between going to the church-house of the school-house for aid. People pulled together. Drywall that had become soaked needed to be removed in a timely manner to keep mold from taking over the effected home. Work groups gathered to help tear out the dry wall. The result did not look like help at all. Instead, the "help" looked like a group of people tearing down their neighbor's house. Upon a successful intervention of this sort, the raw wall studs would be left exposed as if somehow the walls chose to wear a dress with the hemline well above the knee. In this context, it was not a good look.

All this water came raining down upon our congregation at the worst possible time. For three years before Harvey, our church had rented a newly built public middle school cafeteria. Each Sunday we gathered in this location that was to the west of our existing ministry center. After three years of holding weekly worship services on Sunday evenings, the worship population at the western site rose to a high of sixty-six souls. Over those same three years, the congregants and I discussed the possibility of becoming a multisite church (i.e., one congregation with more than one ministry location). Consultants were hired. Mediators led us in group processes. Finally, the church voted to buy and build a second location. A detailed five-year plan was created. The bank stalled, but finally did fund the building of the new second ministry location.

In the spring of 2017, just months before Hurricane Harvey visited Houston, the members of The Family of Faith held a service of dedication in front of the one-acre of land. One acre could not serve as both a sanctuary and a preschool. The church discerned that a preschool building was God pleasing. As the construction crew began their efforts, Harvey halted the work. No one was building anything. The young adult visitor was not the only one upset with God. I joined her in so many words saying, "You are all wet, God!"

Why would a good and gracious God want to tease us with a promising ministry expansion, only to pull it away when it was almost realized? Why would a loving and generous Lord allow us to gain funding with a construction loan only to leave us with just a loan and no construction? If God is the leader of our church, what kind of confused leader is he? What great sin did the people of The Family of Faith commit to be left off the ark like the majority of those in Noah's day?

Moses recorded Noah's story in Genesis 6: "The Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great on the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And the Lord regretted that he had made man on earth, and it grieved his heart." If God can have regrets as the Creator of heaven and earth, why can't I have regrets as pastor of The Family of Faith? I began to regret that I had ever encouraged the congregation to reach out to the community with the Gospel of Jesus Christ vigorously through the multi-site approach. Why didn't I just keep my thoughts to myself?"

Harvey was a very large storm. However, the spiritual storm that was tearing through my faith was significant too. Who was going to tear out the rotting drywall from my soul before the mold of despair overcame my walk with Christ? I did put out virtual devotions for my congregation. I did lead prayers. I did give sermons; however, Harvey hurt my faith as God "rained" on our church's outreach parade. The rotation of the hurricane within me sounded like catastrophizing: "How is the construction crew going to ever work up the land as the land is more soup than soil? If the crew does work up the land, where will we get concrete from to pour the foundation? If we do get the foundation poured, where will we get the necessary building supplies? Everyone in Houston is trying to buy lumber and to acquire drywall, and more drywall. If we can get the supplies, I'm sure it will be at a much higher cost. If the costs of the construction go out of control, the bank will balk at extending the loan to complete the project. If the bank balks at extending the construction loan, then what?" I felt at time like joining the young adult commuter in saying, "You are all wet, God!"

Surprisingly, the Bible does not present Noah as suffering from catastrophizing either before the flood, or after the rains began. Instead, God, the leader of the church, made a covenant with Noah. This covenant included Noah and his sons accomplishing the largest shipment of creatures to ever happen on earth. Instead of catastrophizing, we read, "Noah did this; he did all that God commanded him" (Genesis 6:22, ESV).

While Noah never says to the Creator, "You're all wet, God!" Noah did apparently suffer under a great deal of stress. This stress was still significant in the heart of Noah even after he, his family, and all the creatures, left the ark. Yes, even after the rainbow was given by God to mark the covenant with mankind, Noah still had issues. However, instead of talking back to the Lord, Noah tried to deal with his internal emotional strain by becoming drunk. We read, "He drank wine and became drunk and lay uncovered in his tent" (Genesis 9:21, ESV). Noah became drunk so abruptly that he did not even take time to cover himself in a modest manner. This example of self-medicating developed further into an inner-family dispute. Once sober, Noah cursed his own son, Ham, for his lack of respect for his naked father even though his father had been extremely intoxicated.

One might imagine that Ham would like to say to Creator, "You're all wet, God!" After all, Ham had helped build the ark. Ham had helped gather the animals. Ham stood by aboard the ark with no sign of descent. Noah abuses alcohol and Ham enters his presence. Shouldn't Ham be the one correcting the drunk-naked man? Yet the Lord Almighty had made a covenant with

Noah (verse 15, “between me and you and every living creature of all flesh”). This covenant was given to Noah completely by grace. Noah in no way deserved to observe the rainbow in the sky. Noah in no way deserved to be given the right to build and remain safe on the ark. While it is true, “Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his generation” (Genesis 6:9a); And while it is true that Noah “walked with God” (Genesis 6:9b); the chosen one of God still did not save himself by his own deeds.

Noah was saved by grace through faith. Thousands of years after Noah’s long life came to an end, the Holy Spirit revealed to the Apostle Peter that Noah’s story is related to the victory found in the resurrection of Jesus Christ and in the sacrament of Holy Baptism. No other sacred writer had ever received such a revelation. No other prophet, or apostle, had ever before made the connection between Noah’s ark and Holy Baptism as found in 1 Peter (3:18-4:2):

For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit, in which, he went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison, because they formerly did not obey, when God’s patience waited in the days of Noah while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through water. Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers having been subjected to him. Since therefore Christ suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves with the same way of thinking, for whoever has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin, so as to live for the rest of the time in the flesh no longer for human passions but for the will of God.

The suffering that came to Noah and his family, the suffering that came to Peter and the members of the early church, and the suffering that came to those who lived through Hurricane Harvey are to be considered a standard human experience. Christians, nor non-Christians, are promised a pain free life. However, for those who celebrate the richness of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, for those who are brought safely through the water or Baptism, a radical new identity leads to a radical new way of viewing one’s circumstances. The suffering of the baptized does not move them to abuse alcohol. The suffering of the baptized is not coped with by disrespecting one’s parents. The suffering of the baptized does not lead to disrespecting God.

Instead of telling God that he is all wet, God is telling us to be all wet – wet in the water and the Word – wet unto salvation. The baptized see their own suffering through the lens of Christ’s suffering. This is what Peter did. This is what the baptized are called to do. The baptized are gifted a new spirit, the spirit of the resurrected Jesus Christ, the spirit that makes one truly alive now and forever.

While all human beings are prone to suffering, Jesus suffered as the only truly righteous one for all the rest of humanity – the truly unrighteous people (see 1 Peter 3:18). While Noah

was a righteous man, he was not so righteous as to save the world from sin. For Noah, for Ham and for his brothers, for all eight of those who on the ark were called to be the remnant, Jesus suffered, died, rose, and “ascended into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers...” (1 Peter 3:22). For all those who were not on the ark, Jesus also died to pay for all their sins. For “the spirits in prison” (1 Peter 3:19), Jesus of Nazareth bled on the cross of Calvary. Jesus Christ ransomed the world from its own futile way, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ...” (1 Peter 1:19). “He himself bore our sins in his body and the tree...” is the ultimate way righteousness came to humankind (1 Peter 2:24a).

Not only does the Gospel of Jesus Christ give the baptized a radical new way of looking at their own suffering, but it also gives them a whole new way of thinking. “Arm yourself with the same way of thinking...” (1 Peter 4:1). And again, “...preparing your minds for action and being sober minded...” We read, “Finally, all of you, have unity in mind.... a humble mind” (1 Peter 3:8). And “therefore be self-controlled and sober-minded...” (1 Peter 4:7). “Be sober-minded; be watchful... (1 Peter 5:8).

In addition to a new identify, and a new way of thinking, those born anew through water and the Word are called to live in God’s way - the way of the gift of grace. We read in 1 Peter 1:2, the baptized are to live “in the sanctification of the Spirit...” Those who have come through the water are called by God to “be a spiritual priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 2:5). This new identity, this new way of thinking and living are to be realized by the baptized in a way that proclaims, “the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light” (1 Peter 2:9). This is the way of living that is lived by those who are truly free (1 Peter 2:16).

Noah and his family were just eight souls away from experiencing the end of the world. For those who lived through Hurricane Harvey, the end of the world seemed eminent. Those who have come through the waters of Holy Baptism are to suffer, think, and live with a sense of forward momentum as the actual last day is soon to come. By grace alone, in Christ alone, as inspired by the Spirit alone through the Word and Sacraments alone (1 Peter 1:23), the baptized are called to live toward “an inheritance, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you...” (1 Peter 1:4). The entire purpose of the way of the Lord is to bring as many people as possible to obtain “the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls” (1 Peter 1:9).

By the grace of God those saved by the vicarious life, suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, are more than eight. By the grace of God, the lives of Noah and his family were spared. By the grace of God alone Noah was gifted a covenant and the sign of the covenant – a rainbow. All people in all places are invited by the good and gracious God to celebrate a new identity, suffer, think, live, and die, and rise via the radical redemptive work of Christ Jesus.

On August 21, 2017, the staff of The Family of Faith took time to view a very unusual sight in the Houston sky. No, not a rainbow. Rather, a solar eclipse. Three days later, we were all home and looking skyward as Hurricane Harvey was soon to visit us. At my house the generator

was fueled, tested, and ready to run. A few more days after that, many of the shelves at the local grocery store were completely bare. By August 27, the local lakes were flooding, and roads became impassable. I put most of our furniture up on blocks in our house in case the rising waters were to enter our home. Regularly, I walked with a measuring-tape out to the edge of the flood in front of our house to estimate if our home would be all wet. Thanks be to God, our home stayed dry.

With our church and home in good stead, we were freed up to help others in their time of need. After joining several work groups, I found my faith being strengthened. As I saw the community pull together, strangers helping strangers, the new identity given by the Gospel appeared to be incarnated in the generous response of so many. For example, Luther Church Charities' Comfort Dog program. A Comfort Dog team was dispatched to our area. The team originated in Nebraska. At first, I wondered how petting a dog would be of any help. Yet, these animals were of great help. The comfort dogs comforted the children in our church's preschool – children who did not have the words to express their concerns. The comfort dogs also visited the local public schools. The art teacher at one of those schools was my wife, Amy. Amy had installed a large community art piece created by the one thousand children in her school. When finally assembled, the art installation spelled out "LOVE" in large letters. Immediately under the LOVE sign in this public school, the comfort dogs went to work helping children, staff, and faculty feel the rainbow covenant simply by petting the dogs and talking with the dog's human caregivers.

In order to show our gratitude to the caregivers, I took the Comfort Dog team out to a local BBQ place. This restaurant looks like a portable trailer parked in front of the local hardware store. However, upon tasting the BBQ there produced, one quickly comes to understand that this food is a real treat – real comfort food. The proprietor and chef of this restaurant on wheels presented a persona that was tough on crime. Such a stance was made clear by various signs on the premises, as we as the side arm the chef carried on his person.

When I, the caregivers, and the comfort dogs approached the BBQ heaven, the owner/operator charged out to us. It was clear that he did not want any dogs near his outdoor eatery. We responded by explaining that these weren't just any dogs, they're comfort dogs. The gun toting chef suddenly changed his posture of tone as he explained that he needed some comfort. The dogs, and the rest of us, were warmly welcomed. After petting one comfort dog for a while, the tough-on-crime chef shared with one caregiver that his wife had recently passed away from cancer. We all prayed for the owner/operator of the BBQ place. He clearly was comforted.

Such interactions as those offered by the Comfort Dogs, along with the artwork, and dry wall tear outs, and temporary shelter, were examples of the living Christ risen and reigning in the midst of our shattered community. As God gave the rainbow to Noah as a sign of hope, and as a sign of comfort, so the Lord gave baptism to the world as a means of delivering the ultimate comfort – the forgiveness of sins. The Lord's forgiveness was good for Noah. Christ's forgiveness

was good for Peter. And Jesus' forgiveness was, and is still, good for the post-Hurricane Harvey world too.