



March/April 2022

Today

refresh, refocus, renew

TO
EASTER
AND
BEYOND!

ALSO: THE STORMS OF LIFE

Friends:

Storms are one of the most impressive demonstrations of nature's power. For that reason, we often describe crises in our world and in our personal lives as "storms." Today, for example, our nations and our global relations seem to face one storm after another. And many of us experience personal storms in our lives and in our relationships with others and with God. Where can we find shelter from the storms of life?



In March, chaplains Jason Zuidema and David Rozeboom, both serving in ministries to seafarers, lead us in exploring and reflecting on some of the many storms described in the Bible. These storms not only teach us about God's hand in nature but also point to the Lord as our only true refuge and Savior amid the storms we face in our world and in our lives.

Then, in April, Pastor Doug MacLeod leads us in examining the meaning of Easter. In the first half of the month we focus on the book of Mark as it leads up to Christ's death and resurrection. And for the rest of the month we look through other New Testament passages to see what Jesus' resurrection means for our lives today. These devotions remind us anew that Jesus is our Savior and that he continues calling us to follow him as the resurrected Lord of all.

I pray that you may be refreshed, refocused, and renewed as you reflect on God's Word.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Kurt Selles". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Kurt Selles

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"The Storms of Life"
Jason Zuidema and
David Rozeboom



"To Easter and Beyond!"
Douglas MacLeod

Managing Editor: Jeff Bulthuis
Executive Editor: Kurt Selles

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march

The Storms of Life

Jason Zuidema and David Rozeboom

Life can be difficult even in normal times. In a storm, however, no amount of preparation seems enough. We check the forecast, make sure our homes are watertight, and pray that our electricity will stay on. And sometimes things go wrong.

Recent history is full of storms—one crisis after another has caught our nations and our world unprepared. Many of us also experience personal storms, in our relationships with each other, with ourselves, and with God. How can we stay safe in the storms of life?

This month we will reflect on some of the storms described in Scripture. There are amazing things to learn about the power of God, who controls the wind and the waves. He is our only refuge and our Savior. The authors of this month's meditations work in ministry with seafarers on cargo ships, who are personally familiar with storms at sea. May our reflections this month help us all draw nearer to our Lord and Savior, who leads us in the life of faith.

Dr. Jason Zuidema is executive director of the North American Maritime Ministry Association (namma.org) and an elder in the Église réformée du Québec. David Rozeboom serves as chaplain at the Montreal Ministry to Seafarers of the Christian Reformed Church (ministrytoseafarers.org). The authors thank Kevin Walker, NAMMA director of programs, for editorial assistance.

BE STILL!

He got up, rebuked the wind and said to the waves, "Quiet! Be still!" Then the wind died down and it was completely calm.

—Mark 4:39

Sometimes we learn something in a storm that we couldn't learn any other way. In this story Jesus and his disciples are crossing the Sea of Galilee in a small fishing boat.

Some of the disciples were fishermen, and they had spent much of their lives on this body of water. So from one point of view, *they* were the experts—and Jesus, who had grown up as a carpenter's son, was in their care.

Yet their expertise was being tested. While Jesus was asleep in the back of the boat, the wind suddenly blew stronger. Soon the sea came crashing over the sides and swamping the boat. These fishermen knew how dangerous this storm was. They knew that they all could drown.

They woke Jesus from his sleep, saying, "Don't you

care?!" But as soon as he woke up, Jesus said to the wind and the waves, "Quiet! Be still!" And the sea became calm. The disciples were in a state of awe. "Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!"

Through this terrifying experience the disciples saw clearly who Jesus was. They were tested in the area of life they knew best, and Jesus showed he is Lord over all things. The storms of life can trouble our souls, but God can reveal more of himself to us through these experiences.

Lord, teach us more about you through the storms in our lives. Help us to see our weakness and your strength. Calm our hearts by your Word, we pray. Amen.

HOW GREAT IS GOD?

They saw the works of the LORD, his wonderful deeds in the deep. For he spoke and stirred up a tempest that lifted high the waves.
—Psalm 107:24-25

Ships today are the largest moving objects that people have built. On November 30, 2020, the *ONE Apus*—a mega container ship the size of a city block—was sailing in stormy seas off the coast of Japan and lost 1,800 containers overboard. Many more lay crushed on the deck of the ship. It was a massive ship, and yet it was tiny and vulnerable compared to the mighty waves of a storm at sea.

We are right to fear the awesome power of the ocean. But we should fear even more the Lord, who created the wind and the waves.

The seafarers in our text saw the mighty power of God. Psalm 107 gives several examples of people who were in difficult situations and saw the power of God. People in desert wastelands, prisoners in exile

and slavery, rebels with deadly diseases, and merchants at sea. All despaired for their lives, but they saw God's power and he rescued them. The same God who stirred up the waves also brought these people "out of their distress." God is the sovereign Lord of the universe; he created our world and sustains it.

This psalm celebrates the power of God. It should lead us to fear God in awe and wonder, knowing that he loves and cares for us. It should especially lead us to worship God for his wonderful deeds.

Sovereign Lord, you are King over all creation. We are the people you have created. Show us today your wonderful deeds, your care of creation. Amen.

GOD HEARS US IN OUR DISTRESS

They reeled and staggered like drunkards; they were at their wits' end. Then they cried out to the LORD in their trouble, and he brought them out of their distress. —Psalm 107:27-28

The purpose of the church is often misunderstood. Many people see a “holier than thou” attitude among its members. Yet Scripture teaches that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23).

Many others see the church as a place of spiritual relaxation or material blessing. That misconception causes frustration for people who are faithful believers but still have trouble and distress in their lives. If we describe it in nautical terms, the church is not a warship or a cruise ship but a lifeboat.

The seafarers described in Psalm 107 were helpless in the storm. They had no control over the movements of their ship. But they “cried out to the LORD in their trouble, and he brought them out of their distress.” They could not rely on

their own strength, but they could trust in the power of the Lord.

This is still true today. God’s Word does not say we will not experience “the valley of the shadow of death,” but it does promise that God is with us (Psalm 23:4). God does not ignore the cries of his people; he hears us in our distress.

Are you spinning around in a storm in your life? Rather than trying to fix things in your strength alone, ask the Lord to be with you in your distress and to have mercy on you.

Dear Lord, please carry us through the storms of life. Guide us not to rely on our own strength but to trust in you. We call out to you for help, Lord and Savior. Amen.

THANKSGIVING AT THE END OF THE STORM

They were glad when it grew calm, and he guided them to their desired haven. Let them give thanks. . . . —Psalm 107:30-31

In 1928 the American author John A. Shedd wrote, "A ship in harbor is safe, but that is not what ships are built for."

In the history of shipbuilding, some improvements have come with technology, but most improvements are made in response to disasters at sea. The sinking of the *Titanic*, for example, made clear that there should be enough lifeboats for all passengers. After the *Exxon Valdez* oil spill in Alaska, new oil tankers in the United States are fitted with full double hulls. These requirements, born of past disasters, have saved lives and prevented further disasters.

Knowing the history of shipwrecks and disasters, mariners take all storms seriously. There is a sense of relief when any storm passes and the waters grow calm. When the ship can sail safely through a storm, the

crew can work calmly and make their way to the next port of call. But they remember it happened.

The seafarers described in Psalm 107 had that sense of relief. Their ship was spared, and they arrived safely at their destination. Safe passage calls for thanksgiving!

Looking back at the storms of your life, are you thankful to God for bringing you through? Can you see his unfailing love and wonderful deeds for you?

Dear Lord, protector of all life, thank you for the wonderful deeds you have done in my life. Thank you for guiding me and hearing my prayers. Amen.

RED SKY AT NIGHT

"You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times." —Matthew 16:3

The teaching that Jesus mentions in this passage has become a rhyme related to sailors: "Red sky at night, sailor's delight. Red sky at morning, sailors' warning." The sky appears red when the sun, at morning or evening, shines through clouds—the water particles in the clouds break up the light rays so that we see an orange-red glow.

As storms in the region tended to move from east to west, seeing the red light from clouds in the east meant that a storm was coming toward you, and seeing it in the west meant that it was moving away. Though they have much more sophisticated tools today, a red sky can still mean a lot to seafarers.

At the beginning of Matthew 16, we read that the religious leaders came to test Jesus by asking for a sign from heaven. This question is surprising since

it came soon after Jesus' miracle of feeding a huge crowd of "four thousand men, besides women and children" (Matthew 15:38). Was that not enough of a sign?

Jesus' miracles were signs of the kingdom of God coming near (Mark 1:15), but few people were reading those signs. So Jesus hinted that his critics should take note of this. But they were stubborn and would not open their eyes. What was coming—in some ways like a storm—was good news: the Son of God, Jesus himself, had come to die for everyone's sin so that all who believe in him could be saved.

Lord, teach us more each day about the new life you give us through your death and resurrection. Amen.

I WILL BE WITH YOU

"When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you."

—Isaiah 43:2

In most seaports there are special pilots that join with an incoming ship to guide it into port. These harbor pilots know the unseen obstacles under the water, as well as the currents and other details of the local port. The ship's crew needs the harbor pilot with them on board so that they can respond immediately if there is danger ahead.

In Isaiah 43 we find a similar description from God. The Lord guides us through the overwhelming waters of life. The way ahead is unexplored and dangerous to us, but God comes alongside to reassure us. He is not impersonal, like the waters—or even like a pilot who guides a ship because it is his job. God calls us by name, and he assures us, "You are mine." The Lord shows us tender compassion, spending time with us in the midst of our

struggles. God not only knows the way; he also knows us as we travel it.

Jesus is with us always (Matthew 28:20). He is *Immanuel*, "God with us" (Matthew 1:23). It is a profound truth of the Christian faith that we are not alone but that our Lord and Savior continues to lead and guide us. If you feel like you are in the deep waters of life, know that Jesus is with you and let him be your hope.

Lord God and Father of all, thank you for guiding us in this life. We are in your hands; we are your people. We marvel at the truth that Jesus gave himself to die and rise again for us. Amen.

KEEPING UP HOPE IN THE LONG STORM

When neither sun nor stars appeared for many days and the storm continued raging, we finally gave up all hope of being saved.
—Acts 27:20

At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, there were many questions about seafarers' being able to get home. Long delays, extended contracts, and quarantine requirements weighed heavily, and the sheer uncertainty of when it all might be over caused mental anguish. Facing a storm can be hard enough, but when people face the possibility that the storm might not pass, they can run the risk of losing all hope.

The story in Acts 27 describes the apostle Paul traveling to Rome as a prisoner on a ship. Bad weather at sea could be expected for a few days at a time, but in this case the ship was caught in a storm that had been raging for a couple of weeks. Without seeing the sun or stars, the sailors could not even guess the position of their vessel. The crew and

passengers must have felt battered and beaten. The text says they had stopped eating; many gave up hope and were ready to die.

But God sent an angel to give everyone a message through Paul: “. . . God has graciously given you the lives of all who sail with you.” They were soon shipwrecked, but all were able to get to shore safely. The storm ended. God was directing the situation, even when they had lost human hope.

Dear God, strengthen our faith and show us the hope that is found in you. Keep us safe when storms rage in our lives. We ask for the protection of your Spirit. In Jesus' name, Amen.

SINGING IN THE STORM

You have been . . . a refuge for the needy in their distress, a shelter from the storm. . . . For the breath of the ruthless is like a storm driving against a wall. . . .
—Isaiah 25:4

The old saying “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me” can be helpful for teaching kids to remain calm in the face of a bully. Even so, harsh words can have a striking effect on our lives. Unexpected criticism, hateful comments by a supposed friend, or an offhand remark from a family member can cut deep into our hearts and fester. To our shame, we often retaliate with spiteful words of our own.

Isaiah 25 says that “the breath of the ruthless is like a storm driving against a wall.” God’s people had been cornered and overwhelmed by ruthless words. They could not keep going in their own strength.

But the prophet reminds them that God is their shelter in the storm. Isaiah 25 begins with this joyful proclamation:

“LORD, you are my God; I will exalt you and praise your name, for in perfect faithfulness you have done wonderful things, things you planned long ago.” God has planned from the beginning to protect and guide us, giving us hope and a future with him—as well as many blessings in our lives each day.

Maybe you feel trapped in a corner as ruthless words bear down on you. Know that the Lord can be your shelter. He can give you peace, lifting your heart to remember and sing about the great things he has done for you.

Precious Lord, open our mouths so that we can sing your praises. Help us to use our words to bring peace rather than a storm. Amen.

THE FLOODGATES OF THE HEAVENS

All the springs of the great deep burst forth, and the floodgates of the heavens were opened. And rain fell on the earth forty days and forty nights.

—Genesis 7:11-12

The story of Noah and the flood is not usually described as a journey at sea, but Noah was one of the Bible's most gifted seafarers. He built a massive ship that housed his family and all kinds of animals. And with God's help he navigated 40 days and nights of storming and flooding. Then they all waited months for the waters to recede.

It must have been extraordinary to see the waters coming from all directions—from the ground, from the sea, from the sky—a cataclysm bringing destruction on the earth. Though Noah had built the ship and prepared for this over many years, the force of the storm and the scale of devastation must have been shocking and overwhelming for Noah and his family.

Yet God had prepared a way of salvation. God taught Noah how to build the ark. And when the flood came, God guided Noah, his family, and all the animals to a place where they could land. God also promised that a flood like that would never come again.

The Bible shows that God's justice flows together with his love and mercy. Despite the trauma and destruction of the flood, God provides shelter and promises new and full life. Today we see this even more clearly in Jesus' life, death, and resurrection for all who believe in him!

Father in heaven, thank you for always being faithful to your promises. Protect us in the storms of life, and guide us in your mercy. Amen.

THE LOVE OF GOD

“Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He . . . sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.” —Matthew 5:44-45

Caring for our own is one of our most powerful motivations. We tend to love those who are closest to us, including ourselves. And anything or anyone who hurts us or our loved ones becomes our enemy.

Jesus observed that the people around him had a saying: “Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.” People felt that love was wasted on strangers, and love for people who hurt or threatened them was doubly wasted.

But Jesus came to reveal the character of God, our Creator who loves and cares for us all. He sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. God is our good Father who richly provides all things for our enjoyment (1 Timothy 6:17). In the original Greek language of the New Testament, there is a

specific word describing love that does not seek personal gain: *agapé*. Throughout the Bible we find that this is the kind of love God shows us.

God sent his beloved, one and only Son to die for us when we were his enemies (Romans 5:10). And Jesus—God’s gift to his enemies—calls us to show this same kind of love. We cannot produce this kind of love by ourselves, but we receive it from God—as freely as the sun shines on us. And we are called to share it freely with everyone around us.

Loving and gracious God,
we worship you as our
Creator and sustainer.
Thank you for the love
you have shown to us in
Jesus. Help us to love others
as you have loved us.
Amen.

TRULY REMARKABLE

So God made the vault and separated the water under the vault from the water above it. And it was so. God called the vault "sky."
—Genesis 1:7-8

A storm is a massive movement of water from gas to liquid, above to below, sky to earth. It is a key part of a natural cycle we depend on for daily living.

What must God have been thinking when he made something as wondrous as water? It is the only chemical that naturally exists in our atmosphere in all three phases—solid, liquid, and gas. Mountains of solid ice float. Water dissolves almost everything, and it stays cool even under a blazing sun. We live by water in all its forms.

Water also exists in vast quantities as vapor in the atmosphere. Scientists estimate that there are 3.3 *quadrillion* gallons of water in the atmosphere—enough to cover the entire surface of the Earth with one inch of rain, if condensed. And all of it is recycled 40 times each

year, traveling the world in clouds and pouring into lakes and oceans.

Genesis testifies that God created these waters, above and below. The moisture on our tongues, the blood pulsing through us, the sweat that cools us—all these are the work of God.

Water for life, with seasonal rains and snows to keep the earth well-watered and its creatures supplied with food—let's praise and thank God for all these good things in his wonderful creation.

Dear God, we praise you for your amazing creation. You are all-powerful and Lord over all. Thank you for your care for us in all seasons of life. Amen.

THE SURGING SEA

You rule over the surging sea; when its waves mount up, you still them.
—Psalm 89:9

The biggest wave on record was recorded on July 9, 1958, in Lituya Bay, Alaska. It was caused by an earthquake followed by a landslide, resulting in a towering tsunami more than 100 feet high. Just imagine a 10-story wall of water hurtling toward you.

The psalmist shares that God is in control of the surging seas. He is in control of its every motion. This psalm is a song reminding God's people of all the great things he has done. "I will sing of the Lord's great love forever," it begins. The psalmist sings about how God rules over the whole creation.

God shows his greatness in the sea. Try to imagine how far it extends, all of the life that is in it, the power it exerts on land as it crashes against the continents. God created the sea through his Word, and he still

moves it and watches over it today.

When we need help, we can call on God because he rules our world. As the psalmist sang about God's power to still the waves, so we can pray to our Lord to take care of us in the storms of our lives.

Do you have a storm in your life that you want to ask God to take care of? Pray to the Lord. Sing his praises.

Dear God, you know the storms that are in my heart and my life. Still my heart and calm my storms so that I can praise you in peace. In Jesus' name, Amen.

A DWELLING PLACE IN THE STORM

Whoever dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty.
—Psalm 91:1

Is there a light on near you? Look at it. Feel the heat coming from it. See its blinding brightness—how this tiny thing can light up a room. Now imagine a small warehouse full of nothing but lightbulbs shining, lining its shelves from top to bottom—this is like the brightness of a single bolt of lighting.

Lightning is a striking display of raw power in nature, stunning and destructive. People need to protect themselves from lightning. Many cultures throughout history feared lightning as a god.

Sometimes, we say, sudden events strike us like lightning. A sudden death or accident or disaster—even an overwhelming temptation—can grip us like a bolt from the blue. When that happens, where can we find a place of protection and safety? What is so powerful, so firm, to keep us safe from

the outpouring of danger and destruction?

The Lord is our refuge, our fortress, our rock. This is a common theme in the psalms. The world and all the forces of evil cannot approach or destroy the safety we have in God. Whatever comes at you, God holds you in peace—safe and close in his care.

“Lord, you have been our dwelling place throughout all generations. Before the mountains were born or you brought forth the whole world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God” (Psalm 90:1). Amen.

KNOCKED DOWN BY A THUNDERSTORM

The LORD rained hail on the land of Egypt; hail fell and lightning flashed back and forth. It was the worst storm in all the land of Egypt since it had become a nation. —Exodus 9:23-24

Seated on the banks of the Nile River, Egyptian society prospered with abundance and sophistication. It was the envy of all its neighbors. The climate was mild. Water came not so much from rainfall, but by the regular flooding of the Nile, refreshing the whole delta with moisture and nutrients. All the land was owned by the Pharaoh, and his priests and officials governed the whole society.

In the story of the plagues of Egypt (Exodus 7-12) we see a Pharaoh who refused to recognize the God of Israel as the one true God of heaven and earth. So God sent more thunder and lightning, rain and hail on Egypt than it had ever seen before.

This is sometimes another purpose of storms. How often in the Bible do we see the

proud and mighty being overwhelmed before the power of God? They cannot stand before him. Humans may appear to be strong (at least to each other), but in any storm our weakness is quickly evident.

Rather than standing before God in our own strength, we should bow and pray.

“Seek the LORD while he may be found; call on him while he is near. Let the wicked forsake their ways. . . . Let them turn to the Lord, and he will have mercy” (Isaiah 55:6-7).

Lord God of heaven and earth, teach us humility. Forgive us for our pride. Thank you for looking on us in grace and mercy and for redeeming us in Jesus Christ, our Savior. Amen.

STORMY SOULS

These people are springs without water and mists driven by a storm. Blackest darkness is reserved for them. —2 Peter 2:17

In our lives, as in nature, some of the storms that we encounter are human-made. Yes, the Bible warns that even in the church there are greedy abusers who take only for themselves. How often do we hear news of church leaders lying, taking money, destroying marriages, abusing children, or seeking power and influence? Even on a smaller scale, many ministries set out to help people in need but end up exploiting them. This is not a new phenomenon, because we read about it in 2 Peter 2.

Storms and trouble in life can come to us through people who try to draw us into their stormy souls. Indeed, we must all be vigilant that we do not hurt people we claim to help. We are warned that this is like storm clouds that appear in a dry season but bring no rain, or like a spring without water.

False teachers take the words and promises of God and twist them in order to control and destroy others.

We ought to be on guard against anyone who twists the Word of God for their own gain. We ought to “test the spirits to see whether they are from God” (1 John 4:1). Likewise, we must ask God to “deliver us from the evil one” (Matthew 6:13) so that we and the leaders of our churches may be faithful.

Dear Jesus, protect us from the storms that false teachers can create. Give us leaders who are faithful in private as well as in public. Forgive us our sins, Lord, and guide us to live for you. Amen.

FAR FROM THE TEMPEST

"Oh, that I had the wings of a dove! I would fly away and be at rest. . . . I would hurry to my place of shelter, far from the tempest and storm."
—Psalm 55:6-8

What turmoil the psalmist experienced here! Enemies watched him constantly, eager to threaten and accuse whenever they could. The worst part was that some of them were people he had trusted as friends.

Our inner storms can be intense when we are betrayed by someone close to us. In storms like that, we often cannot think straight. We question everything. Where can a solution be found?

The writer of this psalm wanted the same solution we would—to *get away*. How wonderful it would be to fly away like a bird when we are faced with betrayal. It would be such a relief to leave all our troubles behind, to unplug from all the challenges.

But that was not possible for the psalmist. Enemies dogged

him again and again. The threats on his life continued.

Have you felt the sting of betrayal by someone who was close to you? Perhaps you are living in that kind of storm now.

At the end of the psalm, the writer provides the wisest response we can give in situations like this: "Cast your cares on the LORD and he will sustain you." Whether we can fly away from our enemies or not, we can give our burdens over to the Lord, and we can trust in him to set things right.

Lord, please heal our minds and hearts. We give our burdens over to you. Forgive us our sins, and help us to forgive the people who have sinned against us. Amen.

THE STORM OF JUDGMENT

When the storm has swept by, the wicked are gone, but the righteous stand firm forever.
—Proverbs 10:25

The Bible includes many passages about the destruction of the wicked—that is, people who refuse to live God's way. They decide to go their own way instead, and that leads only to destruction. That's because we are all sinners. Born with a sinful nature, we cannot live pure and perfect lives on our own. Everything we do is somehow tainted with sin, and we can see this easily because nothing we ever do is perfect.

But there is hope. God has reached out to us with the offer of salvation and new life. We cannot save ourselves or live perfectly on our own, but Jesus Christ, God's Son, has come to pay the debt of our sin—and when we believe in him as Savior, God credits us with Jesus' righteousness. This means we can actually be righteous even though we have no way to be righteous

on our own. This also means that when the storm of God's judgment comes at the end of time, we will not be swept away with the wicked. Because of Jesus Christ and his finished work, we will be saved.

Are you a believer in Jesus, the Son of God, who came to save us and give us full life forever with him? If not, ask him to save you today! Ask God to forgive your sins for Jesus' sake, and to guide you to live for him by the power of his Spirit. God is our sure and only refuge from destruction, and we need him to help us live faithfully each day.

Father, forgive us our sins. Help us to trust in your power to save us through Jesus Christ, and guide us to live for you each day. Amen.

UNUSUAL KINDNESS

The islanders showed us unusual kindness. They built a fire and welcomed us all because it was raining and cold. —Acts 28:2

Great stories often include scenes of danger and courage. This story about the apostle Paul on Malta follows a gripping account of a two-week storm at sea and a shipwreck (Acts 17). And although this story tells of a deadly snake-bite and miraculous healings, it focuses at first (and at the end) on what may seem rather mundane: hospitality. Paul and his companions were shipwrecked, wet, and cold, so the islanders of Malta welcomed them by making a fire.

Simple hospitality can have a profound effect on people caught in the storms of life. Hebrews 13:2 encourages us: "Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it." Did the Maltans know who they were welcoming, or what mission they were

advancing, when they went out in the rain and cold to meet these strangers?

Paul's ministry of spreading the good news of Jesus was often supported by the kindness of others. The Maltans showed hospitality before they even heard Paul's teaching or saw the miracles he did in Jesus' name.

Can you remember a time when others showed unusual kindness to you? Whom could you show kindness to today? Showing kindness should flow freely from a heart full of joy because of Jesus' teaching.

Thank you, Lord, for the unusual kindness you have shown to us. Help us to reflect your love and to welcome the people around us, so that others may know the joy of your salvation. Amen.

A GREAT CRASH

"The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house [built on sand], and it fell with a great crash."
—Matthew 7:26-27

Economic and political turmoil has unfortunate, direct consequences on many seafarers. During the 2008 global financial crisis, hundreds of ships were suddenly laid up without work to do. Shipowning, a business that had been profitable for many years, was suddenly in deep trouble. History is full of similar tragedies. Change is constant, and any hope we put in the status quo will be disappointed.

Every economy and culture will fail eventually. Jesus knew this as he was teaching the crowds. Some of his listeners probably felt good about their life the way it was. Maybe they had become successful in business and were popular in their community, and maybe they thought they deserved all the blessings they had. We all like to feel secure in ourselves and in our own situations.

But Jesus warned that if people trust only in themselves, their life can easily crash down around them. There is only one way to build a storm-proof house, and there is only one rock we can build securely on. We must build our lives on the rock of Jesus, the one and only Savior. He promises a new life that begins now and will last with God forever. Storms may surround us, but if our life is built on the rock of God our Savior, our future will be secure.

Lord, help us to build our lives securely on you. Thank you for your protection when the storms of life come our way. Keep us focused on Jesus, we pray. Amen.

YOU MUST COMMIT

When you ask, you must believe and not doubt, because the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind.
—James 1:6

There is a seafarers' mission in Hong Kong that, rather than waiting for ships to come to the dock as most missions do, sends chaplains out to visit seafarers anchored in the harbor. The chaplains travel to the ships on small boats. When a ship is out in the harbor, visitors need to climb up the side on a rope ladder in order to get on board. Though it is safe, the rope ladder can sway back and forth a lot, out in the midst of the wind and waves.

I once visited the Hong Kong mission and had the opportunity to board ships out in the harbor. At the first ship, our small boat bobbed up and down several meters at a time. I was given one key piece of advice: "You must commit." It would not work to let your doubts stop you halfway while reaching out for the ladder. You had to lean out of the

boat to grab on, and if you had doubts about grabbing the ladder, you could plunge into the cold swells of the ocean.

James understood the problems of doubt. Doubts in our hearts can create our own internal storms. We cannot find solid footing when our lives are blown and tossed about by winds of our own making. Committing to the Lord helps us to move through the challenges of life, knowing that the testing of faith produces perseverance.

Lord Jesus, help us to commit our lives to you. Keep our feet firm in your Word and hold us tightly in your love. In your name, Amen.

A GREAT WIND

The LORD sent a great wind on the sea, and such a violent storm arose that the ship threatened to break up. —Jonah 1:4

Despite many advances in technology, seafaring is still dangerous today. In the past 10 years, more than 1,000 large ships have been lost worldwide. We often don't hear about these shipwrecks in the news unless they affect our own country or region. Many of us in North America, however, heard that the United States-flagged cargo ship *El Faro*, on its way to Puerto Rico, sank at sea with all 33 crew members on October 1, 2015, after sailing into Hurricane Joaquin.

The prophet Jonah boarded a ship heading for Tarshish, a destination as far away as he could go from where the Lord had sent him to preach—in Nineveh. But despite Jonah's rebellion, the Lord brought him back in the right direction. God sent a storm that threatened to wreck the ship until

Jonah was thrown overboard. Then, as the storm quickly cleared, the sailors worshiped the Lord, and God sent a huge fish to bring Jonah back to dry land.

This story shows the amazing power of God—not only over nature but also to bring repentance and salvation. God turned Jonah around and brought him to preach a message of grace to Nineveh. And the people there repented and were spared from destruction.

Have there been storms in your life that God has used to bring repentance and faith?

Lord God, we ask for forgiveness, for we have sinned against you and our neighbors. We look to you in the storms of life to build our faith in Christ. Amen.

WHERE WILL YOU GO IN THE STORM?

The LORD will not leave the guilty unpunished. His way is in the whirlwind and the storm, and clouds are the dust of his feet.

—Nahum 1:3

About 150 years after the time of Jonah (see March 21), Nahum prophesied about the fall of Nineveh. This city was the capital of what was now the vast Assyrian Empire.

With the great river system that connects the Mediterranean region to the Indian Ocean, Nineveh had access to enormous wealth. In trade and business, the Assyrians accumulated gold, silver, and copper from all over their empire.

But the Assyrians also exploited the people they ruled. The Bible tells of how Assyria pilaged ten of the tribes of Israel and took them away as slaves, leaving the two tribes of Judah and Simeon as its vassals. This injury to God's people was never undone.

Though Jonah had preached God's grace to Nineveh and the people had repented back

then, the Assyrians had grown proud and corrupt as they expanded their empire. Nahum preached that Nineveh would fall, and in the end Assyria reaped what it had sown. A bitter civil war saw Nineveh sacked by its former subjects.

Through Nahum, God told his people that they needed to trust in him rather than the ways of the world. The storms of war brought low the greatest empire at that time, and the guilty did not go unpunished. God alone "is good, a refuge in times of trouble."

Lord, your power overwhelms us. Keep us away from sin, and turn our hearts continually to you. Let us find refuge in you always. Amen.

RAIN IN THE SPRINGTIME

Ask the LORD for rain in the springtime; it is the LORD who sends the thunderstorms. He gives showers of rain to all the people, and plants of the field to everyone. —Zechariah 10:1

Many Bible texts talk about the destructive power of storms and how sometimes God uses storms to bring judgment. But many other texts describe storms as bringing blessings, especially in the rains that water the land.

Regular rainfall was essential for ancient cultures with limited irrigation systems. When Jacob sent his sons from Canaan to buy food in Egypt (Genesis 42), it was impossible to grow food where they were. They needed rain for their crops, but instead they had a massive famine. Can we imagine that kind of need? Access to clean water is essential for survival.

Zechariah reminded God's people that the Lord is the source of rain. Zechariah's prophecies were pastoral, emphasizing that God is at work

in nature and is the source of the people's power. We all need to ask God for his blessing and to live lives that reflect the source of that blessing. At that time, the people were rebuilding the temple of God in Jerusalem, so Zechariah reminded them that God calls everyone to turn away from sin and to serve him in faith.

The closing chapters of Zechariah begin pointing to the coming Messiah (Christ), the Savior. Not only does the Lord provide rain for everyone, but in the coming kingdom God will provide all that everyone will need.

Dear Lord, thank you for providing for our daily living. Nourish us too with your Word, and fill our hearts with your love forever. Amen.

IN AWE OF THE LORD

Samuel called on the LORD, and that same day the LORD sent thunder and rain. So all the people stood in awe of the LORD and of Samuel.

—1 Samuel 12:18

Samuel was Israel's prophet at the end of the period of the judges (which lasted about 300 years after the time of Moses and Joshua—see Joshua 1). In our reading for today, Samuel gives a speech after confirming Saul as Israel's king.

Samuel walked closely with God and was a faithful leader. But the people had often turned to worship the false gods of the nations around them, and they now insisted on having a king like the other nations, even though the one true God was their King. In his speech Samuel reminded the people of their sins. He also asked the Lord to use a storm to prove his point. And the Lord sent a storm.

In that society many of the people were farmers. They were always watching the weather, especially at the time

of harvest. If the crops became wet, mold would grow on them, and they could not be harvested and stored. So this rain was very disturbing for Samuel's audience.

Yet God's mercy is always available. The people now understood how great their sin was in asking for a king, and the Lord and Samuel now had their attention. But Samuel also reassured them that he would pray to God for them and continue teaching "the way that is good and right."

Dear Lord, please forgive us when our hearts are drawn toward the things of this world rather than you. You are the only true God. Amen.

DEFENDING AGAINST ENEMIES

Pursue them with your tempest and terrify them with your storm.
—Psalm 83:15

Many of us think of the water as a place to relax and play, like on a day at the beach. For seafarers, winds and waves are part of their daily work and can be deadly enemies. Regular maintenance is essential to make sure a ship is ready for a storm that might come up.

Seafarers take their enemies seriously, and God's people need to do that too. The writer of Psalm 83 recalls how God delivered his people in the past, and the writer pleads with God to help them again. The psalmist speaks of blowing the enemies around like dust or sending a firestorm or a tempest to terrify them and make them repent.

At first, these verses might make us uncomfortable, but they describe the power necessary to overcome the enemy. God's power is not arbitrary or cruel; it shows that God is lov-

ing and just. Both the enemies and the people of God will come to know that the Lord alone is "Most High over all the earth."

Only God can banish evil. God's action, described as a kind of storm in these verses, has tremendous power to overwhelm an enemy.

We can call on God to defend us. Jesus himself had to defend against Satan, the great enemy. And in Jesus' case, he used the power of the Word of God—and Satan could not overcome it (Luke 4:1-13).

Dear God, protect us from the enemies of your kingdom—sin, death, and the devil. Thank you for the power of Jesus Christ in our lives. Amen.

A DRIVING WIND SWIRLING DOWN

The storm of the LORD will burst out in wrath, a driving wind swirling down on the heads of the wicked. —Jeremiah 30:23

On nautical maps, an important feature is the “wind rose,” a graphic image used by meteorologists to show how wind speed and direction are typically distributed in a certain place. This tool can be very useful to mariners for avoiding trouble spots at sea.

In some ways, this passage in Jeremiah 30 is like a “wind rose.” It helps God’s people see how the Lord was going to act in order to restore them. You see, at this time in history, God’s people were in exile for rebelling against God. They had followed after other gods and had refused to honor the Lord, who had made them into a great nation. So God had disciplined them by sending them into exile.

Sadly, though, their conquerors had brutally enslaved them and carried them away after destroying their land. And when

God’s people cried out in their distress, the Lord heard them.

So how would God act to restore his people? “The storm of the LORD” would burst out like “a driving wind swirling down on the heads of the wicked.” God is powerful enough to overwhelm evil. The people needed God to save them from this enemy that had exploited them.

Explaining all this, God promised to bring them honor again, saying, “So you will be my people, and I will be your God.”

Lord and God, your power is greater than any other. Thank you for being merciful and just. Help us to honor you above all and to serve you faithfully. Amen.

SHIPWRECK

Three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move.

—2 Corinthians 11:25-26

On September 2, 2015, news outlets around the world reported a horrible tragedy: the body of three-year-old Alan Kurdi had washed up on a beach near Bodrum, Turkey. Alan's family of Syrian refugees were trying to cross the Mediterranean Sea to a Greek island when their inflatable boat capsized. This tragedy testified to the refugees' desperation: they chose to risk the harsh sea in a raft to escape the threats of terrorists in their homeland. The accident also reminds us of the long history of shipwrecks in that area.

The Mediterranean Sea was a key part of the apostle Paul's missionary travels. He tells of being shipwrecked three times and being stranded on the open sea. In Paul's work of spreading the good news of Jesus, he was also sometimes beaten, pelted with stones, and

thrown into prison. That happened because people in some places were hostile to the message of Christ. In addition, there were false teachers who twisted the message of Jesus for their own profit, fame, and power. Sadly, false and corrupt leaders are still doing similar things today.

As Paul (and Jesus) explained, challenges and dangers often go with sharing the good news because the devil is opposed to it. Satan doesn't want anyone to be saved. But in God's strength, the good news of Jesus keeps spreading.

Will you help to share it too?

Lord, guide us to share your good news everywhere, and help us to deal faithfully with challenges that arise. Amen.

A WAY OF APPROACH

You have not come to a mountain that can be touched and that is burning with fire; to darkness, gloom and storm. . . . But you have come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem.
—Hebrews 12:18-22

In the Old Testament, it was not unusual for people to be terrified and in awe of God's presence. For example, in Exodus 20:18-19, "when the people saw the thunder and lightning and heard the trumpet and saw the mountain in smoke, they trembled with fear. They stayed at a distance and said to Moses, 'Speak to us yourself and we will listen. But do not have God speak to us or we will die.'" The people were afraid because they knew they were sinful and that God is holy and awesome, with power beyond imagining.

The book of Hebrews helps to explain the significance of Jesus' death for our sake. When Jesus died on the cross, he experienced the same separation from God that so terrified Israel. By paying for our sins and reconciling us to

God, Jesus cut through that darkness forever. The terror of being in God's presence is no longer there because we can approach God through Christ, the one he loves and accepts.

Hebrews urges us to approach God at any time. Through Jesus, God made himself accessible to all people, regardless of their situations or circumstances. God loves us all, and he is ready to give grace to anyone who comes to faith through his Son.

Father in heaven, thank you for providing the way for us to come to you—through Christ, the one and only Savior. Help us to live for you always. In Jesus, Amen.

HEARING FROM THE LORD

A great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind.
—1 Kings 19:11

The prophet Elijah was running for his life. He had been faithful to God, warning King Ahab and Queen Jezebel that they needed to obey God and stop misleading the people of Israel. But Ahab and Jezebel would not listen—not even after God showed his power through Elijah in a dramatic showdown (1 Kings 18). Instead, Jezebel threatened to hunt Elijah down and kill him.

So Elijah ran away into the wilderness. There God sent an angel to care for him, and that gave him energy to keep traveling all the way to Horeb (Mt. Sinai), where God had met Moses and the people of Israel many years earlier (Exodus 19-20).

In a cave on Mount Horeb, Elijah heard God calling him to come out and meet him as he passed by. A series of storms came. A great wind tore at the

mountain and shattered rocks. But God was not in the wind. Then the earth shook, and fire came out of nowhere, but God was not in the earthquake or the fire.

Then there was a sound of stillness. And Elijah emerged, with his face covered, to meet with God. God spoke with encouragement and care, giving Elijah new tasks to do. And these included anointing another prophet so that Elijah would no longer work alone.

In this way the Lord reaffirmed Elijah, and Elijah continued to serve God faithfully.

Dear Lord, we long for your guidance in our lives today. Thank you for your encouraging Word. Help us to serve you faithfully. Amen.

WHO LAID THE EARTH'S FOUNDATIONS?

*"Who shut up the sea . . . when I fixed limits for it and . . . said,
'This far you may come and no farther; here is where your
proud waves halt?'"*
—Job 38:8-11

The book of Job explores the relationship between humans and God. Job, who is faithful to God, goes through a difficult series of tests. He loses all his children, all his livestock, and his livelihood. He also loses his health. But he never stops trusting God (Job 1-3).

Job's friends come around, and instead of consoling him, they say he must have done some terrible wrong, or all this trouble would not have happened. But they are mistaken, and their words do more harm than good. Job wonders why all this calamity is happening. And eventually he calls on God to answer him (Job 4-31).

Another friend speaks up and offers wise insights about the all-powerful God, who has created all things. We cannot understand all of God's ways because God is so different

from us. Yet God cares for us, teaches us wisdom, and is righteous and just (Job 32-37).

Then God himself speaks (Job 38-41), asking Job if he knows how the earth was made, who gave the sea its limits, and how the forces of nature work to bring food and water for all living things.

Of course, Job does not know these things—and neither do we know all things. But God is good, and our lives are in his hands. God allows storms and trouble to come our way, and often we are not at fault. But God can also bring us through and heal us. We can trust that in God our future is secure.

Lord and God, Maker of
heaven and earth, the uni-
verse is full of your glory.
Save us, we pray, in Jesus'
name. Amen.

LORD, KING, AND SAVIOR

Each one will be like a shelter from the wind and a refuge from the storm, like streams of water in the desert. . . .

—Isaiah 32:2

How amazing parents are! They sacrifice so much for their children and are eager to provide opportunities for them. A key preoccupation of seafarers during their visits to ports around the world is to buy books, toys, and clothes to bring back for their children. Parents show love and protection in so many ways for their children, and God does the same for us.

In Isaiah 32, God shares a wonderful announcement. This comes in the midst of warnings to God's people, who have turned away from him to rely on the power of other nations (see Isaiah 28-31). But even though the people have been unfaithful, Isaiah reminds them that God has promised a kingdom of righteousness.

Today we know that the King who "will reign in righteous-

ness" is Jesus, and leaders who follow his ways will rule with justice. This means that everyone—young and old, men and women, parents and children—all will be able to flourish and learn and grow in peace.

God's kingdom is a refuge from the storms and troubles of life. The Savior, Jesus, has given us new life and promises it "to the full" (John 10:10). We need not fear or dread the future. Families and communities can thrive. And our King invites us to welcome others in from the storm.

Lord, King, and Savior, you are our refuge and strength. You care for us with love and compassion. Help us to care for and love others as you have done for us. Amen.

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