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I traveled to Mississippi in 2006 to be part in response to Hurricane Katrina. Psalm 29 guided my theological reflections on my experience. As I read the psalm, please note that this psalm is about the Lord – it is not about a storm. The storm is the metaphor for speaking of God’s power and the effect of God’s power over all the cosmos. It makes no claim of intentionality for the storm, but names the glory and power of God as it is revealed in the creation.

Psalm 29 *The Voice of God in a Great Storm* A Psalm of David.

Ascribe to the Lord, O heavenly beings,
ascribe to the Lord glory and strength.
Ascribe to the Lord the glory of his name;
worship the Lord in holy splendor.
The voice of the Lord is over the waters;
the God of glory thunders,
the Lord, over mighty waters.
The voice of the Lord is powerful;
the voice of the Lord is full of majesty.
The voice of the Lord breaks the cedars;
the Lord breaks the cedars of Lebanon
He makes Lebanon skip like a calf,
and Sirion like a young wild ox.
The voice of the Lord flashes
forth flames of fire.
The voice of the Lord shakes the wilderness;
the Lord shakes the wilderness of Kadesh.
The voice of the Lord causes the oaks to whirl,
and strips the forest bare;
and in his temple all say, “Glory!”
The Lord sits enthroned over the flood;
the Lord sits enthroned as king forever.
May the Lord give strength to his people!
May the Lord bless his people with peace!

No Response without Risk (Psalm 29)

Although we had seen signs of the storm earlier, when we were about thirty miles from the MS coast, the evidence of Katrina’s damage was everywhere. Trees snapped or uprooted by the storm had been bulldozed to the edge of the road in heaps nearly as high as our van. “The voice of the Lord breaks the cedars; ... The voice of the Lord causes the oaks to whirl, and strips the forest bare; and in his temple all say, “Glory!” But we were struck silent.

Driving to another town for supplies the day after our arrival, we saw beached tugboats – run aground nowhere near water or a beach, but rather left high and dry by the interstate where

flood waters had carried them. “The voice of the Lord is over the waters; Even with evidence in front of us, the power of the water was incomprehensible.

The summer storm season had begun. During such a storm, roofs trembled, floors shook, under a lightning-lit sky. “The voice of the Lord flashes forth flames of fire. The voice of the Lord shakes the wilderness.” We were shaken at this mild exposure to the power of a gulf storm.

On our first night, the camp was awakened by a man’s nightmare. The destruction had taken him back to his days in Vietnam. The little girl who lived in the house we were rebuilding was afraid to be separated from her mother to go to school. “May the Lord give strength to his people! May the Lord bless his people with peace!” For the people who live there it takes strength to get up in the morning; to face the destruction; and to resist despair. Not only one man and little girl still wait to be blessed with peace.

Time in the Gulf Coast was a dramatic encounter with power unleashed that implodes into dust and debris any power we might possess or imagine. It provided me a radical confrontation to the companionable manageable God who inhabits much of our daily thinking – reminding that God does not fit within the limits of our imaginations and is not constrained by what we can do. The meaning of the psalmist’s poetry was transformed by a reality that demolished any illusion that we are equal partners with the God whom we serve, whose Son’s ministry we do, and whose Spirit we have received.

As we worked in oppressive heat, or drove for hours, stood in line longer to purchase scarce building supplies, our conversations ranged over questions about whether or not people should rebuild, FEMA and the federal government then or now, the demographics of New Orleans, the still obvious gap between rich and poor, ecology and the politics of petroleum. The time for such questions and discussions was among ourselves -- NEVER in moments of ministry to the wounded. Occasionally disaster workers would be asked to do things that didn’t “use our skills to capacity”. We were reminded that people need what they need, regardless of what we have to offer. Doing mission work means that the burden is on us to serve, not on those who are served to accommodate our expectations or experience.

As the time went on, the shock of the destruction wore off. I began to discern God’s presence and power anew. If God’s glory could be heard in thunder, it could also be heard in the whine of chain saws clearing debris and the whack of hammers building homes. If God’s voice can break the cedars, it is also God’s voice that moves not only the spirits of those who come to serve, but spirits of the victims of disaster, keeping them from breaking, so that amid the rubble, residents have unshaken faith in God that is witness to us all. If the voice of the Lord can make the earth skip like a calf, it can also heal children of the flood who skip across sod-less lots laughing. If the voice of the Lord is over mighty waters, it also has the power to roll back seas of despair. If the Lord sits enthroned over the flood forever, then that eternal presence and power finds its faithful reflection in the presence of disaster workers’ presence in the Gulf Coast to this day. If the voice of the Lord causes the oaks to whirl and strips the forest bare, it can also, as it did in the beginning, speak a word into chaos -- from which comes life and hope.

And so it is, that if those who serve in places here and around the world have no words to describe the destruction, the poverty, the need we have seen, we will also say we have no words to capture the sense of utter privilege we have for being called and commissioned for mission.

Today we commission some of our young people for that privilege: some will help rebuild homes; some will work with the poor; some will travel to a part of the world that does not share our language, our values, our political safety or our faith expression, despite the shared name “Presbyterian.” They will meet people like and unlike themselves; ones who have similar opportunities and privileges and more; and some who have none of the ones we assume are a given. They will encounter those whose faith witness leaves ours in the dust and those who have

no understanding of why we might travel to across the street, let alone half way around the world to do as Jesus asks. Our youth will return to report to us of their experience. I hope they tell us of work accomplished, powerful worship and relationships built. I also hope they come home with questions as well – about the justice and mercy of God, the disparity of wealth, the grace of God, the power of human relationships to transform the world, the ability of one person to make a difference, the greater and lesser faith sacrifices people make and their visible and invisible outcomes.

There is benefit and we hope continuing, growing opportunity to travel to do mission work. Such trips can provide a sort of mountaintop experience that comes from being part of a focused community without the distractions of home life. But mission work is not just for the young and those who travel. A few weeks ago, the Board, in the midst of its strategic planning process, committed to revitalizing our mission work beginning in Central New York. There is need right here. According to the most recent statistics available:

In Onondaga County:

- * nearly a quarter of all children are born to adolescent parents (That means females between the ages of 10 and 19. Consider your daughters and granddaughters.)
- * 18% of children in the county live below the poverty level
- * nearly 40 % of children receive some kind of school lunch benefit.
- * In Fayetteville-Manlius, we supply a Food Pantry to feed our neighbors in one of the richest countries in the world.
- * In reported outcomes for 2008, the Fayetteville-Manlius and Jamesville-Dewitt school districts have a drop out rate before high school graduation between 2-3%. In North Syracuse it rises to 9% and in Syracuse city schools, 29%.
- * According to the 2009 Onondaga County poverty report, the unemployment rate has doubled since 2004.
- * Hispanics and blacks living in poverty are unemployed at nearly three times the rate of whites living in poverty.
- * Seventy one percent of impoverished households are headed by women with children (and of those more, than half the women are working).
- * Eight percent of older adults in Onondaga are living in poverty.
- * Nearly 13% of the residents are uninsured.

In Onondaga County! Not somewhere across the country or halfway around the world. Here! Where we live! We do not have to leave home to serve, to encounter needs and circumstances that should cause us to ask questions of our God, our faith, ourselves, and the current effectiveness of our political system, our education, health care and economic policies, as well as our understanding of and our relationships with our neighbors.

There is not just need. There is an ache in us for seeing the work of our hands and hearts and how it makes a difference; for the building and strengthening relationships among ourselves and with our neighbors in joint efforts; and cause for wrestling with powerful questions about God, grace and justice. For the sake of the world and for our own sakes we need to engage the risk of mission – a full body experience demanding hearts and minds, bodies and souls invested in the work of Christ.

There is no response to the call to serve that is without risk – the risk is that we will be changed. There are misapprehensions we are likely to be compelled to leave behind. Some of

them are: that we have earned what we have; that those we serve are different from us in elemental ways; that we have nothing to learn or receive from those we perceive might need us; or that our own situations are significantly less fragile than others we encounter. We often enter into mission with thoughts of the good we will do, that we might engage our sweat and labor, our minds and relationships to understand others different from us. More than likely we will receive those fruits of our labors.

Yet, the risk is that we will receive much more -- that we will be transformed so that we look at our family members, our neighbors, our co-workers and fellow students, and our communities with more appreciative and gracious eyes -- as does our God. The risk is, of course, that we might become more fully human as Christ was, more generous, more joyful, more compassionate, and more aware of the difference we can and do make in the world.

There is risk in response to Christ's call to serve those in need: There are no guarantees of answers, of understanding, of success, of perfection, or of gratitude -- in Mississippi, in Korea, in Niagara Falls, in Syracuse or anywhere else. We can only respond to a call to serve with the awed awareness of the power of God to accompany us in all ministry, empower us for all service, and have compassion and purpose for who we are and those whom we serve, regardless and because of all our human frailties. It is God's power and love that fills our prayer, our hope, our strength and our peace that we have to offer. And let all God's people say, "Glory."