

“Standing in Sandy”

Matthew 7:24-29

Series: In Not Of Week 9. Stand Firmly

The Rev. Dr. Douglas C. Hoglund

The Woodside Church

November 24, 2024

We all saw her coming. Forecasters called her Superstorm, Frankenstorm, Bride of Frankenstorm. Arriving just in time for Halloween 2012, she sounded like a horror movie, a meteorologist's worst nightmare – the collision of a hurricane from the east, a wintry storm from the west and a blast of arctic air from the north all under a full moon with high tides. And she headed straight for Atlantic City to clean out the casinos.

Superstorm Sandy was the largest Atlantic hurricane on record with tropical-storm-force winds spanning 1,150 miles. She inflicted \$70 billion in damage. 24 US states endured the wrath of Sandy, from Florida to Maine and as far west as Wisconsin. But New York and New Jersey faced the worst of her fury.

Millions in the Northeast were without power. The city that never sleeps went dark. Trees smashed homes and power lines. Barrier islands were no longer islands. 13 foot storm surges overwhelmed sea walls. Tunnels, highways and subways became seaways. Thousands of planes cancelled, lines at the gas stations snaked for miles, schools and businesses all closed. In the middle of the insanity, people found a way to laugh at this Frankenstorm. They sent fake pictures on Twitter. One of them showed the Statue of Liberty about to be overwhelmed by a wave. Another showed her going down for the third time. One even pictured her cowering behind her pedestal.

If you lived through it, you probably have a Sandy story. When you are deprived of electricity, heat, light, hot showers, refrigeration, television and internet, you truly realize what matters most: coffee. I used a camp stove to brew a pot on my front porch.

When you are down, you also find out who your friends are. Believe it or not, I received two emails from pastors saying, “We are praying for your distressed, suffering, struggling community.” Where do these pastors live? Mozambique and Haiti. I thought they were going to send mission trips to us.

How do you stand in Sandy? How do you stand firm in the storm? And where is God in all this?

I think Jesus loved the beach. When you read the New Testament you find Jesus hanging out on the beach of the Sea of Galilee. He finds his first disciples by the shore. He teaches his parables by the water. He throws a beach party for five thousand. I don't think they had a clambake but He did serve seafood. He even cooks breakfast for his followers on the shore. Jesus loves the beach.

But there is one thing He tells us to never do: don't build your house on the sand:

But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash. Matthew 7:26-27

When Jesus says, “It’s foolish to build your house on the sand,” He isn’t against oceanfront real estate and He would never call the people of the Jersey Shore fools. He is concerned about the foundation of your life. It’s foolish to build a house on sand *with no foundation*. Why? Because storms happen! Divisions, divorce, debt, disease, death.

If you ask, “Why are there storms? Why is there suffering?” some religions answer, in essence, “It’s your fault.” Some religions say, “We believe in reincarnation. Yes, you are good now. But in a previous life you sinned and now you are paying for your sins.” Other religions say, “You sinned in this life and this is God’s judgment on you.” Others will say, “It’s just blind fate or bad luck.” Some scientists say, “It’s your fault because of global warming.” Some philosophers say, “There is no meaning and no purpose. It’s all random. We are just the victims of the forces of nature.”

What does the New Testament say? Surprisingly, it does not try to explain the cause of suffering or storms. It accepts them as a reality, a fact. In this passage Jesus does not say the person who builds on the sand is punished with a storm and the person who builds on the rock isn’t. The storm hits both of them. Jesus does not explain why some get hit by storms and some don’t. Instead, He tells us what to do to prepare for the storm...because sooner or later it will come.

The question Jesus asks us is: What is the foundation of your life? What is the foundation of your career? What is the foundation of your marriage? What is the foundation of your family? Some kids were asked questions about dating and marriage.

The first question they asked is “How Do you Decide Who to Marry?” Alan, age 10, wrote, “You got to find somebody who likes the same stuff. Like, if you like sports, she should like it that you like sports, and she should keep the chips and dip coming.”

Kristen, age 10 answered, “God decides (who you marry) way before you grow up and you get to find out later who you’re stuck with.

When asked, “What Do Most People Do on a Date?” Martin, age 10, said, “On the first date, they just tell each other lies and that usually gets them interested enough to go for a second date.”

What Would You Do on a First Date that is Turning Sour?” Craig, age 9, said, “I’d run home and play dead. The next day I would call all the newspapers and make sure they wrote about me in all the dead columns.

How Can a Stranger Tell If Two People are Married?

Derrick, age 8, replied, “You might have to guess, based on whether they seem to be yelling at the same kids.”

Finally, How Would You Make a Marriage Work?

Ricky, age 10, says, “Tell your wife that she looks pretty, even if she looks like a truck.

We laugh at these kids’ observations but they’re funny because they are partly true. Even in the best of marriages and families we tell lies, take each other for granted, yell and fight. During my thirty-eight years in the ministry I’ve seen some homes built on shaky foundations.

- I don’t have a problem with alcohol. I just need a few more to help we unwind.
- I know I use drugs. So what? They stimulate my creativity and take the edge off.
- I’m just borrowing the money. I’ll pay it back before anyone in the company notices.
- Stop worrying. My spouse doesn’t have a clue about our little rendezvous.
- Listen, I know the debt is getting big. But I have another plan for handling it.
- Okay, I admit I work too much. I promise I’ll cut back after this next project.

Many build their lives on a mixture of sand – what gives them pleasure, what makes them popular, what they learn from pop psychology or posts on social media, what gives them prosperity, power or a better position at work.

Then storms come: hurricanes and floods ravage communities, stock markets crash, wars rage, covid destroys lives and shuts down the world, jet liners crash into buildings and knock them down to their foundations.

So what is the one foundation which cannot be shaken? What is the only foundation that lasts in this life and for all eternity? What is the single strongest foundation on which to build your life? Jesus, the Rock of our Foundation. He says,

Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. Mathew 7:24-25

When you listen to His Words in the Bible and put them into practice in your life, you build on a Rock solid foundation which no storm in two thousand years has been able to shake. Pleasures, popular trends, possessions, philosophies and powers all come and go. Still the Rock of Jesus stands.

After the April 2005 flood swept over Yardley, I went down to a ranch house along the river to help clean out the mud and water in the basement. To my utter amazement, one entire side of this house’s foundation was completely knocked in. I could stand outside and look directly into the basement of this dear elderly woman. For several hours we worked to pump out the water and sop up the mud. When it was somewhat under control and I was about to leave, this kind lady stopped me for a minute. “I want to show you something,” she said. “After we cleaned out the debris I found this.” She showed me a large water soaked book – a Bible. The flood washed it in through the

gaping hole in her foundation. Sooner or later, every foundation will be shaken. The only one which stands is the Word of God.

I must caution you: building on the Rock of Jesus is hard. In 2006 I joined a team from Woodside which laid a foundation for a medical clinic in San Miguel. At first we thought we could remove the dirt and rock in a day, maybe two. Three at the outside. Well okay four days. Five max! But the rock in that pit was so tough we began to think it would beat us. For five and a half days we chipped, picked, hammered and hauled rock out of that pit. The Dominican Contractor told us to move the dirt and rock over there. Then he said, “No move it over here.” Then he told us to dump it in a third place. We were afraid they were going to tell us to put it back in the pit. My friend Bryon Pinajian said, “You know this is what they did to break the spirit of prisoners in concentration camps.” It was hard work. But the next year, San Miguel had a medical clinic to heal the diseases of the community.

According to Jesus, building on the Rock means hearing and doing His words. A foundation clears a space in the rock. Jesus is not trying to break your spirit. He wants to clear a space in your spirit for His Word to dwell. Your hardest work may be undoing the things you unthinkingly do instantaneously, every day. You’ll have to do things which are not your normal knee-jerk reaction such as:

Be salt for the earth and light for the world

Surrender angry, hurtful, lustful thoughts to God

Keep your promises and work on your relationships

Love your enemies, practice non-violence and pray for those who push your buttons

Reconcile and go the extra mile

Let God’s kingdom come, His will be done in you as it is in heaven

Serve God instead of money

Care for people – the true treasures which last forever in heaven

Do not worry about your life...but seek first His kingdom and his righteousness

Stop judging others and start working on your own planks and problems

Keep on asking, seeking and knocking until God opens a door

Bear good fruit which blesses others

Leave the wide way of the world and take the narrow road less traveled

That’s the way to build a foundation on the Rock of Jesus Christ that no storm in this world can shake.

Superstorm Sandy struck the week before our annual Church Has Left the Building. Many were without power. Many of the seventeen churches that were doing it with us had no electricity. One pastor said to me, “Our church has no power!” I replied, “You mean your building has no power.” “Yeah, that’s what I meant.” I encouraged the seventeen churches to still leave their buildings and view this crisis as an opportunity.

And then you all showed up Sunday morning. And in spite of not having any heat, hot water, refrigeration, television or the internet, you came to serve your neighbors.

- 6,000 rolled utensils for Trenton Area Soup Kitchen

- Thousands of books collected for Grover Washington Middle School
- Local roads cleaned through Adopt a Highway
- Canned goods and coats collected from neighbors
- 150+ meals prepared for Aid for Friends
- Adventure Club kids sang for Pickering Manor residents and then honored our Veterans in the parade which was also set up by Woodside workers
- NOVA Garden in Core Creek Park cleaned and restored
- Habitat for Humanity ReStore cleaned and organized
- 22 dresses made & delivered to children in Haiti
- A van full of furniture for Sunday Breakfast Rescue Mission
- Worship for the residents of Manor Care
- A meal for family members of those awaiting transplants
- Children brought joy to the residents of the Alzheimer's wing at Sunrise
- Sorted and organized the thrift store at A Women's Place
- Helping single moms and elderly neighbors
- A worship service for women and children at the Salvation Army Shelter in Philly and five women gave their lives to Christ

That doesn't even include all that was done by the sixteen other churches. My brother, who lives in Neptune City next to Belmar, New Jersey came because he wanted to help others. We cleared trees from the lawns of the Thornridge section of Levittown. At first they were hesitant to accept our help. But then they said, "Okay." One homeowner came out later and said, "I have no words for this. I can't thank you enough." Another woman was in tears. A third said, "I have to write you a check." I said, "Please don't. We're doing this for free." "Please let me give you a donation." I said that was not necessary. She said, "C'mon. I've never heard of a church that turned down a donation." I said, "Well now you have." I took her check and passed it on to Urban Promise Trenton.

That night servants from several churches gathered in the Vineyard. That night we weren't Presbyterians and Methodists and Lutherans and Catholics but one Body – the Body of Jesus Christ. We shared together the Lord's Supper. We praised the Rock of our Salvation. We stood tall even in the face of Superstorm, Frankenstorm Sandy. The glory goes to the only Rock that stands in the storm.

So when the next storm comes – where will you stand?