

The Parable of the Wise and Foolish Builders
Isaiah 43:1-7; Matthew 7:24-29
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Isaiah 43:1-7

But now thus says the LORD,

he who created you, O Jacob,

he who formed you, O Israel:

Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;

I have called you by name, you are mine.

² When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;

and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;

when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,

and the flame shall not consume you.

³ For I am the LORD your God,

the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.

I give Egypt as your ransom,

Ethiopia and Seba in exchange for you.

⁴ Because you are precious in my sight,

and honored, and I love you,

I give people in return for you,

nations in exchange for your life.

⁵ Do not fear, for I am with you;

I will bring your offspring from the east,

and from the west I will gather you;

⁶ I will say to the north, "Give them up,"

and to the south, "Do not withhold;

bring my sons from far away

and my daughters from the end of the earth—

⁷ everyone who is called by my name,

whom I created for my glory,

whom I formed and made."

Matthew 7:24-29

²⁴ “Everybody who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise builder who built a house on bedrock. ²⁵ The rain fell, the floods came, and the wind blew and beat against that house. It didn’t fall because it was firmly set on bedrock. ²⁶ But everybody who hears these words of mine and doesn’t put them into practice will be like a fool who built a house on sand. ²⁷ The rain fell, the floods came, and the wind blew and beat against that house. It fell and was completely destroyed.”

²⁸ When Jesus finished these words, the crowds were amazed at his teaching²⁹ because he was teaching them like someone with authority and not like their legal experts.

There are two kinds of houses in Florida, my sister Anne tells me: wood frame and concrete block. The wood frame houses are not nearly as structurally sound, so when hurricane season comes—you know, when as Jesus puts it,

The rains fall, the floods come, and the wind blows and beats against those houses, they fall and are completely destroyed.

Anne works in insurance on the east coast of Florida, so she is quick to add that wood-frame houses cost a lot more to insure!

The concrete block houses are much more solid. Jesus might have said that when

*The rains fall, the floods come, and the wind blows
and beats against those houses. They didn’t fall.*

Of course in today’s parable, Jesus’ houses aren’t wood or concrete; the difference between them is that they get built on sand or on bedrock. When the storms come, the house built on the sand gets blown over flat, while the house on the rock stands firm. It probably has a much smaller insurance premium, too.

Jesus uses the wise and foolish builders’ houses to talk about what happens to our spiritual lives when the storms come. Some folks, Jesus says, survive storms better than others.

The storms can be any number of terrible things. The Wednesday Women’s Bible study brought up all sorts of tragedies: people in prison, often people of color, who are falsely accused; the first responders on September 11th who are

experiencing so much more cancer than others; losing a child; bad accidents; family conflicts; wars. Each of us could add storms that have come upon us or people we love.

Storms come, and our passage from the book of Isaiah promises us good news: God is with us. The prophet says,

*² When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;
when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,
and the flame shall not consume you.*

God promises that the fires won't burn us, the flames won't consume us, and the high rivers won't overwhelm us.

Now, tell that to the foolish builder whose house was destroyed.

That's the big difference between our two passages for today. In both, the storms come. Isaiah is much more confident that we'll make it through them.

Jesus is more nuanced than Isaiah. Maybe a bit more realistic. The truth is, all storms don't end up the same way. Sometimes the rivers do overwhelm us, even though God is with us. Sometimes the flames burn us, even though God is right beside us.

Jesus knows—and I think we know—that the same storm can knock over one house while another stands strong. Sometimes it's the same storm that comes upon us at different times in our lives, like the death of one parent and then the death of another; sometimes it's the same storm that affects two different people, like when two peers are both laid off from the same workplace.

The same storm takes down some houses, and leaves others standing. So what's the difference?

It's tempting to think about the foundation on which we build our lives as the difference between our houses standing strong or crashing down. I was thinking about it this way when I posted a question on the church's Facebook page about what Jesus might have been talking about when he said that some houses are built on sand.

You all had lots of good answers—everything from youth sports where everything depends on winning to money; from trying to please everyone around you to privilege and status. One person wrote social media. Now since this whole conversation was happening on Facebook, I’m still trying to figure out if that person was disappointed with themselves or with me! Anyway, a long list came out of what it meant to build your house on the sand. But the more I studied this parable this week, the more I realized my question was off-base. It wasn’t that the answers were wrong—I think building our lives on status is not a very sturdy foundation. But here’s the thing—Jesus tells us straight up in the parable what it means to build our houses on sand, and on bedrock.

Here’s what he says:

*“Everybody who hears these words of mine and **puts them into practice** [emphasis added] is like a wise builder who built a house on bedrock....²⁶ But everybody who hears these words of mine and **doesn’t put them into practice** [emphasis added] will be like a fool who built a house on sand.*

Maybe you’re like me. Until I studied this closely this week, I always thought that the people who build their house on sand are non-Christians, and the people who build their house upon a rock are Christians. But that’s not quite right. Listen to what one of my favorite commentators, Dale Brunner, says about this:

“The two houses is about two kinds of Christians, not about Christians and non-Christians. (Note: both are listening to Jesus’ words.) The house that crashes is the house of Christians who find Jesus’ words important enough to hear, but not realistic enough to live.”

So if we put Jesus’ words in conversation with Isaiah, it seems like God is with us in the storm, no matter what. That’s pure grace—no matter what happens in our lives, God accompanies us. That’s what Isaiah says. But whether our spiritual lives get wiped out or not depends in some ways on how we have put Jesus’ words into practice, so that we can still find hope and joy and peace.

I want to be careful here—that doesn't mean that if we follow Jesus' words, storms won't come. Storms come. His parable doesn't say that the people who put his words into practice don't face storms. It says that the spiritual lives of those who put his words into practice will get through the storms more easily because they feel more connected to Christ.

Putting our faith into practice deepens our faith and strengthens it. We discover more clearly what it means to depend on Christ when we are seeking to follow his words on a daily basis. God is with foxhole Christians, but I have to think that soldiers who have been seeking to follow Jesus' words day in and day out experience God's presence more fully when the fighting comes. They might both get shot, but the wise soldier is able to deal with the aftermath much better than the foolish.

Putting words into action helps keep our houses safe when storms come.

My sister Anne helped me realize this, too. She was telling me about how much preparation there is when hurricane season approaches. People cut down as many coconuts as they can from their trees, because they can act like cannonballs. People cut down any palm fronds that might be loose, because those act like missiles when the winds kick up. Then of course once a storm is actually on its way, people start taking in patio furniture and nailing boards over the windows.

Anne's a go-getter; I could imagine her serving as the hurricane safety coordinator in her neighborhood. Let's suppose she puts together an email for everyone to read just before each hurricane season, and before each hurricane.

Now let's say that everyone reads her email. That's probably the most far-fetched part of this scenario. But let's just say that everyone reads her email. The neighbor on her left reads it all and puts her words into action; the neighbor on her right reads it all and ignores it all.

Which house is going to do better in a storm?

So Jesus hasn't sent us an email, but he has given us words to follow. In fact, this passage is at the very end of the sermon on the mount—the largest

collection of his words in the gospel of Matthew. Here are just some of the words he tells us to follow:

⁶ “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also.

Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.

“Do not judge, so that you may not be judged.

⁷ “Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you.

Putting these words into practice, Jesus says, will help things go better in a storm. After all, the same storm damages some houses a lot more than others.

This is true not only figuratively but literally. When Hurricane Michael came through Mexico Beach, Florida, last October, the damage was nearly total. A video over the town showed dozens of foundations with no houses at all on top of them; materials and belongings were strewn miles away. Nearly all of the trees were down. The path of destruction was practically complete.

Practically, because one house remained. Its grey roof was completely intact. The tan porches facing the beach on the second and third floors were still there. The aqua window panes were unchanged, and none of the windows were broken—not even the picture windows looking out over the ocean. It almost looked like that house had to have been dropped in after the storm because it was so untouched by all of the damage.

There was an interview on CNN with the homes’ owners. Turns out that they went above and beyond code for every single aspect of the house. They constantly asked the question, “what would survive the big one?” Code was for 120 mile per hour winds; they built for 240 mph.

Most importantly, they put into practice what their architects had told them about getting a “hurricane house”—one that will survive no matter what storms come. The owner said,

I could have built a balcony on the east side of the house, but the engineers said, “I thought you wanted a hurricane house.” We [changed that plan.]

We wanted more overhang up on the roof, but he said, “I thought you wanted a hurricane house.” So we did what he said.

Somehow I hear Jesus saying those same words to us.

When we resist turning the other cheek, “I thought you wanted a hurricane house.”

When we don’t ask for help to love our enemies, “I thought you wanted a hurricane house.”

When we judge others, “I thought you wanted a hurricane house.”

When the rains fall, and the floods come, and the wind blows, I want a hurricane house. Don’t you?