

I

In 2008, Hurricane Ike slammed into the upper Texas coast, the eyewall making landfall just east of Galveston on a narrow strip of sand called the Bolivar Peninsula. The small beachside community of Gilchrist, Texas, took a direct hit. The next day, aerial footage shot from a news helicopter showed block after block of neighborhood streets where homes had been swept away as if by a giant broom, and the only evidence that there had ever been a house was the driveway that now led from the street to nowhere.

Except for one. That's the image that sticks in my mind to this very day. There amid all of that rubble, amid all of that desolation, one pretty little yellow house with white and black trim stood tall, and it stood alone.

I can't get that little yellow house out of my mind. It had obviously been subjected to the exact same forces of violent wind and water as all the other structures in town. So why did this one remain standing, whereas all the others fell?

Clearly, there was something qualitatively different about this house, something beyond what could be observed from street level. But it wasn't until the storm came – it wasn't until the winds blew and the waves rolled that the difference in this house became obvious. There was clearly something different about this house's foundation.

II

Between Christmas and Easter, we're reading and preaching our way through Matthew, working our way more or less straight through from beginning to end. And for the past few Sundays, we've been reading and preaching from a section near the beginning of Matthew's gospel called the Sermon on the Mount.

The Sermon on the Mount is the longest uninterrupted speech by Jesus in Matthew's gospel, and its placement between Jesus' baptism and the launch of his itinerant ministry of teaching and healing leads many scholars to argue that within the larger framework of Matthew's Gospel, the Sermon on the Mount functions something like an inaugural address – a major speech wherein a new leader sets an agenda and casts a vision for all that is yet to come.

Other scholars argue that the Sermon on the Mount functions something like a collection of Jesus' Greatest Hits. They argue that these chapters in Matthew's gospel are collection of the go-to themes and sayings and lessons that Jesus preached constantly throughout the years of his earthly ministry, all brought together by Matthew in one easy-to-access place.

Whatever the case may be, in our story today, Jesus has ascended a small hill overlooking the Sea of Galilee. His disciples and the crowds have pressed in, and Jesus has begun to teach.

So I invite you now to listen for a Word from God from Matthew 7:1-14, 24-29.

Jesus said,

*“Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. 2For with the judgment you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get. 3Why do you see the speck in your neighbor’s eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? 4Or how can you say to your neighbor, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ while the log is in your own eye? 5You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor’s eye. 6“Do not give what is holy to dogs; and do not throw your pearls before swine, or they will trample them under foot and turn and maul you.*

*7“Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. 8For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. 9Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give a stone? 10Or if the child asks for a fish, will give a snake? 11If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him!*

*12“In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets. 13“Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it. 14For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it.*

*24“Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a*

*wise man who built his house on rock. 25The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock. 26And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand. 27The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell—and great was its fall!”*

*28Now when Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were astounded at his teaching, 29for he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes.*

This is the Word of God for the people of God.

### III

Once upon a time, I thought I might like to have a career as a meteorologist, a professional forecaster of weather. But then I learned that meteorology requires advanced work in statistics, calculus, and physics, and science and math have never been my strongest academic suits.

But nevertheless, I am about to give you a guaranteed, 100% accurate weather forecast, right here and now.

It’s going to rain. It’s guaranteed.

But you know what, I’ll go one better than that. It’s not just going to rain. It’s going to storm. The wind will blow, and the water will rise. There’s a 100% chance of a storm. It’s just that no one can say when.

Jesus said, “Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock.”

#### IV

My friend, at some point in your life, it’s 100% guaranteed to storm. It might be tomorrow. It might be years from now. Or maybe you’re living through a storm in this very moment.

But until Jesus returns in glory and the creation is finally redeemed, storms are one of the few things in this life that are 100% certain.

And so let me ask you, how is your foundation? On what kind of ground does the base of your life rest?

Here’s the thing about foundations. They’re not really visible from the curb. When it’s sunny and skies are blue, you can’t really tell anything about a house’s foundation. When it’s sunny and skies are blue, hardly anyone gives the foundation of the house any thought.

But when the storm comes, when the wind blows and the waves roll in, the foundation is what makes the difference between the house that stands and the one that falls.

Storms are revealing in that way – they pull back and expose structural issues that were hidden below the surface when the skies were sunny. Storms are apocalyptic in that way – for that’s one

definition of the word apocalypse – a revealing of something previously hidden.

And so I ask you again, my friend. How is your foundation? On what kind of ground are you building your life?

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus provides us with the things we need to build a life that will withstand the storms.

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

Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy. But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.

Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

No one can serve two masters. You cannot serve God and wealth.

Do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring enough troubles of its own.

On and on Jesus goes, saying by saying, brick by brick, stone by stone, supply his followers with the foundation for building a godly life.

And then he concludes, “Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat

against that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock.”

So again, my friend, have you looked at your foundation lately? Someday, the winds are going to blow. The rain is going to fall. The waves are going to roll. When that day comes, on what will your house be built?

## V

As we think about our life together, it strikes me that every human with whom we share this planet has lived through a major storm, the likes of which had not been experienced by anyone on our planet with a living memory. I’ll never forget the day in the spring of 2020 when my youngest son asked me, “Daddy, how many global pandemics did you live through when you were a boy?”

Storms, whether they’re formed by wind and water or by a virus or by hatred and violence or by some other cause, are often apocalyptic – that is, they expose and reveal things that had previously been hidden.

And in the conversations I have with other leaders in our community and across the country, it seems to me that at this present moment, every institution and organization finds itself coming to terms with all that has been revealed in recent years. Every organization and institution is having to examine things it used to take for granted. Every organization and institution is, in some way or form, checking the status of its foundation.

This congregation was chartered on Christmas Day 1820. The First

Presbyterian Church of Athens, as far as institutions and organizations go, has been around a long time. The church has endured its share of storms over the years.

But as they say in the financial services industry, past performance is not a guarantee of future results. And so as we enter our third century of mission and ministry, we must ask ourselves, on what are we building the foundation of this ministry? Does the foundation of this church rest on its history and institutional memory? Does it rest on a building? Does it rest on its pastors and staff?

Or does it rest on an unshakeable conviction that the life, death, and resurrection of a first-century rabbi named Jesus of Nazareth somehow changes everything about both human history and human destiny? Does it rest on a commitment to not just hearing the words, but acting on them, showing mercy and practicing hospitality and cultivating generosity and doing justice and walking humbly with our God, come what may?

On what are we building the foundation of this church?

Jesus said, “Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock.”

Thanks be to God. Amen.