



## Faith Lutheran Prayer Pilgrimage to New Orleans March 2007

(The following is a journal written by members of Faith Lutheran Church, Houston, Herb Palmer, pastor, as they traveled the Prayer Pilgrimage in New Orleans the weekend of March 18, 2007.)

Peace and Blessings to all of you,

Our group of pilgrims from Faith has now embarked on our pilgrimage to New Orleans. Arthur and I thought we would share with you some of our experiences, in the hope that it might serve as a "virtual pilgrimage" for you this weekend. Please keep us, and the people of New Orleans, in your prayers this weekend.

It's funny what runs through your mind as you embark on a journey like this. Even packing becomes a "spiritual" experience. We packed "light," since we're only going to be gone three days--but our light packing fills the back of the van, and is crammed under the seats, too. As we packed this morning, I couldn't help comparing our packing to Mark's description of the sending of the twelve:

"Jesus went around the villages in the vicinity teaching. He summoned the Twelve, and began to send them out two by two and gave them authority over unclean spirits. He instructed them to take nothing for the journey but a walking stick--no food, no sack, no money in their belts. They were, however, to wear sandals but not a second tunic." Mark 6: 6-9.

It also made me think about what people "packed" when they fled the hurricane. How do you take only what is necessary--when you know you may never return? Family pictures are precious, medicine is necessary, children need a favorite bear, heirlooms remind us of the history of who we are. What do you take when you know the choice means you may live without what you leave behind, perhaps for the rest of your life? What is it like

when, without a choice, everything precious to you is destroyed by a hurricane? How do you go on in the face of that sort of devastation? I think we have a lot to learn from the people in New Orleans about the importance of things, and the importance of people, and of faith. Please pray that we will have ears to listen to their stories.

Before we set off, Pastor Palmer and Kathy gave to each of us a "Clinging Cross." Coincidentally (or perhaps not) it is made of wood that looks as though it has been twisted by the wind. Yet the wood is solid, unmarred, and the cross fits in your hand--so that you can cling to it. It came with a card that read, "This cross you are clinging is a reminder of the Hope you have in Christ Jesus." Maybe that's what Jesus was trying to teach the disciples when he sent them out with nothing. Cling to me, and God will provide. Please pray that God will send to all of us the faith to cling only to him, and to trust that he will provide. May God send to all of you a blessed and restful weekend.



## #2 THE PILGRIMAGE BEGINS

Good Morning:

We began our pilgrimage with a brief service of Word and Prayer. Pastor Palmer shared with us the reading from Chapter 65 of Isaiah concerning the restoration of Israel. He reminded us that, just as God promised Israel that it would be restored, New Orleans is in the process of being restored, too. Reflect in silence on what it means to be restored. What would it mean in your own life? What does it mean to "restore" life, when everything you had has been destroyed?

A woman shared her story with Pastor Palmer this morning. She told him her mother had passed away the year before Katrina. She was not finished grieving when Katrina hit. She said she'd clung to her mother's things through her grief, but even those things were destroyed by the hurricane. She has rebuilt her life--and said that her faith had been a large part of that restoration. "They shall live in the houses they build, and eat the fruit of the vineyards they plant; they shall not build houses for others to live in, or plat for others to eat....They shall not toil in vain, nor beget children for sudden destruction. For a race blessed by the Lord are they and their offspring." Isaiah 65: 22, 23.

Contrasted with that is the story of the pastor who formerly served at Grace Lutheran Church in Lakeview. His church, which was near the breach of the 17th Street Canal levee, through which Lake Ponchartrain flooded the city. The pastor's home was destroyed, and his church had 8 feet of standing water in it for two weeks. A call went out to all churches names "Grace Lutheran" throughout the country, for help in rebuilding the church. The pastor stayed for several months to see through the initial effort to rebuild the church--but the personal tragedy was overwhelming, and the pastor has since left his call. Grace is currently without a permanent pastor; please pray that the Holy Spirit will call a leader to serve them soon.

We ended our morning worship by singing Hymn 784 from With One Voice, "You Have Come Down to the Lakeshore." It is a beautiful song, a portion of which I've set out below:

You have come down to the lakeshore, seeking neither the wise nor the wealthy,  
but only asking for me to follow.

You know full well what I have Lord; neither treasure nor weapons for conquest,  
just these my fishnets and will for working.

You need my hands, my exhaustion, working love for the rest of the weary—  
a love that's willing to go on loving.

Sweet Lord, you looked into my eyes, kindly smiling, you've called out my name.  
On the sand, I've abandoned my small boat. Now with you, I will weather new seas.

Please continue to pray for the restoration of New Orleans.



#3

GRACE LUTHERAN CHURCH - LAKEVIEW

"BEHOLD, I'M MAKING ALL THINGS NEW"

Revelation 21

We've just visited Grace Lutheran Church, and the area around it in Lakeview. Before the storm, Grace was situated in a wealthy, upper middle class community that had been 68% of the city's tax base. As of 2004, their baptized membership was 464 and their regular attendance at worship was 140.

Now, much has changed. The church is surrounded--even nineteen months after the storm--by vacant houses, with spray paint on the front marking where the National Guard went from house to house to find bodies. Those houses that are occupied, with rare exceptions, are "occupied" by people living in FEMA trailers in front of their own homes. The church has now become a mission church, dedicated to reforming a community from the ruins of a neighborhood.

The first people we met were volunteers from Minnesota and Wisconsin, who had come down with a small youth group to help with rebuilding. One of the men had come here three years in a row, to work and to help with rebuilding. The sanctuary has been rebuilt. It is beautiful, with images of the Ark everywhere, but the fellowship hall is still being finished. We also met the church organist, the only remaining member of the staff. He came to the church himself in the wake of the storm to save some of the pipes from the original organ. They are stacked upstairs in a storage room. They've also built a large room upstairs to house volunteers, who live on air mattresses and shower with cold water, because the church still has no hot water.

Yet there are signs of hope and home even amid the continued devastation. There were new homes being built on the blocks around Grace. We met a man who'd moved here from another neighborhood. His house there had been washed away, so he'd come here to buy a lot and built a new brick house--up on piers. The Grace choir was rehearsing in the sanctuary. It is only eight people--likely much smaller than before--but they were singing *Dona Nobis Pacem*. Modern people, who had been through so much, praying for peace in an ancient language,

Please pray as well for Chris Philpott. Mr. Philpott is a lay person who has been called from North Dakota to lead Grace through its rebuilding. It seems they have called a lay person because their future is so uncertain that it is difficult to find an ordained person to serve their needs. Many of the churches we will visit today teeter on the breach of closure, because their communities are so much smaller that they cannot sustain a pastoral staff.

The following is from the prayer pilgrimage form prepared by the ELCA:

Let us pray for the congregation of Grace Lutheran Church, for all who lived in Lakeview, and for all whose homes and possessions were washed away by the storm.

(Silent reflection)

Gracious and loving God, our rock and fortress: we pray for all who have experienced the loss of home, possessions, and loved ones in the storm. Grant them your consolation and peace. Bless the congregation of Grace Lutheran, and the citizens of Lakeview, with courage, strength, and the assurance of your continuing hope and presence. In Christ's name we pray.

Amen.

 #4  
BETHLEHEM LUTHERAN CHURCH  
"KATRINA RELIEF. DONATIONS WELCOME. WE ARE BETTER TOGETHER."

Just a few blocks off St. Charles Avenue, and the palatial homes of the Garden District, we came to Bethlehem Lutheran Church. Bethlehem is the only predominantly African-American congregation in New Orleans. It is surrounded by homes for poor people, whose ancestors were first slaves, and then servants in the Garden District homes. Before Katrina, it had a baptized membership of 190 and worship attendance was 100 each Sunday. Their pastor is the Reverend Patrick Keene. Pastor Keene was not there, but we met his wife and grandchildren. Please pray that they will be strengthened in their ministry.

Although the church itself was not significantly affected by the flooding, many of its members' homes were destroyed and the church is much smaller now than it was before

the storm. We heard different numbers from people at the church, but worship attendance is down to between 50 and 100 each Sunday. They used to have a youth-led praise band, but their leader is no longer serving--and the band has now disbanded.

We met Nathaniel, the chairman of the Hospitality committee. He told us that although he had no water in his house, his sister and his niece did. His sister is back in her house, but his niece - Diedre - hired a contractor who turned out to be unscrupulous, and still isn't in her house. Please pray that Deidre will be restored to her home, and that the contractor will perform as he promised.

We also spent a long time talking to Harold, who served in the Green Berets for thirty years. Before the storm, he had his own home; his house was flooded, and his furnishings were destroyed. It has been difficult to get the funding to rebuild, so he lives in a FEMA trailer in front of his home. The trailer is not insulated, so "when it's cold outside, it's cold inside; when it's hot outside, it's hot inside." There is also some sort of odor or chemical that makes it difficult to breathe. He talked at length about the fact that the men's group used to be the backbone of the congregation--but now when money comes in, they give it away, rather than taking the money, buying materials and using it to rebuild the neighborhood themselves. It seems that they are so discouraged and overwhelmed, that they've somewhat lost the will to take control. Please pray that the Holy Spirit will strengthen these men, and renew their spiritual gifts, that they will again be a light to the community.

The sense of loss and bitterness at Bethlehem is profound, but hope endures. Harold and another man we met, Remus, have been friends for fifty years. They attended elementary school together at Bethlehem, and were working together at the church when we met them.

One of the chief problems they told us about was a lack of political will. As Harold said, "The politicians in their suits and ties are all finger pointing. They ought to take off their coats and ties, come down here and gut out a house--feel the heat, smell the smell, and then maybe something would be done." Yet, even in the face of disappointment and leadership failure, the church was making preparations for a baby shower, there was a car wash going on, and volunteers were expected to occupy the upstairs dormitory from now until June. There was even a wall in the church where all of the volunteers had signed their names.

From the ELCA Prayer Pilgrimage:

Gracious and loving God, our strength and our salvation; we pray for the congregation of Bethlehem Lutheran Church and for all who live and serve in their serving, and clarity of mission, that your name may be praised and your will be done in their witness to you. In Christ's name, we pray. AMEN



#5

LOWER NINTH WARD

EZEKIEL Ch. 37 1-7 "CAN THESE DRY BONES LIVE?"

It is almost impossible to describe the scope of the devastation in the Lower Ninth Ward. Nineteen months after the storm, what was once a vital community has been almost totally abandoned.

We walked through the empty streets in neighborhoods that had once been filled with neat, tidy homes. The neighborhood is almost deserted. Houses stand as empty skeletons, broken windows are dark like empty eye sockets. Signs of the life that was are everywhere: a boarded up grocery store, a child's swimming toy, chairs tossed like blocks in a pile against a window, a moldy Winnie the Pooh buried in a pile of debris. Across the highway, where a barge broke through the levee--almost nothing is left. Houses were swept from their foundations; only concrete blocks mark where they once stood. A sign reads "Tourists, Shame on you. Driving by without stopping. Paying to see my pain. 1000+ died here." Another, painted in spray paint on an empty house, begs for supplies and donations to rebuild. It is as quiet as a grave. Birds don't sing; the trees are dead. No one lives here.

We paused to pray at an empty church. Its sign was broken, its door was ajar, and its name was nowhere to be found. The cross on the steeple is missing, and the inside of the church has been gutted to the rafters. A sign tells those with appointments to see Pastor Thomas to "please have a seat in the conference room and wait until called," but there is no conference room, and Pastor Thomas is gone--perhaps never to return.

Yet by some miracle, the stained glass in the empty church windows is beautiful and unbroken. Inside, a large, beautiful painting of the Baptism of Jesus sits unmolested, propped alone against the exposed rafters of the wall. In front of the church stands a

sign, with a quote from Ezekiel: "Can these dry bones live?" The only answer was to pray in the silence--because words were inadequate to express the grief and the loss.

We met people in the Lower Ninth Ward who were trying to rebuild, and a few had succeeded against seemingly insurmountable odds. One, Mrs. Bernice, invited us into her home and told us her story. She'd evacuated on Saturday, before the storm hit, and her house was entirely submerged for a month. Yet she counts herself fortunate: she had good insurance, so her home has been rebuilt and refurnished--but her neighbors are all gone. There are no other houses occupied on her block, and all around her house, it looks like a war zone.

It seems that Mrs. Bernice is the living answer to Ezekiel's question, painted on the front of the abandoned church: "Can These Bones Live?" The answer, here, is mixed. Some live, but the death of this neighborhood is seems all but permanent. Hope of the resurrection is fading and yet, even now, people shovel debris from their houses--in a physical prayer for renewal that is profound beyond words.

The empty church continues to haunt, crying out for the congregation that was washed away. The passage from Ezekiel on its sign is below. Please reflect on it, and pray that God will send his spirit to breathe life into this deserted neighborhood. Pray that he clothes the empty skeletons of houses in flesh and muscle--in the form of shingles, sheetrock, and windowpanes--so that the neighborhood might rise again to what it once was. Pray for Mrs. Bernice to be sustained in her new, but lonely, house. Pray for all of those whose homes are gone, washed away in the flood. Pray for the child whose toys are buried in piles of debris, monuments to the joy that once was--and that can be again--by the help of God, and the faithful work of human hands.

#### Ezekiel Ch. 27: 1-7 "A Valley of Dry Bones"

The hand of the Lord came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the Lord and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. He said to me, "Mortal, can these bones live?" I answered, "O Lord God, you know." Then he said to me, "Prophecy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. Thus says the Lord God to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the Lord." So I prophesied as I had been commanded; and as I prophesied, suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone.



#6  
GETHSEMANE LUTHERAN CHURCH  
CHALMETTE, LOUISIANA

The last stop today on our pilgrimage was *Gethsemane Lutheran Church*, in Chalmette, Louisiana. A congregation that once numbered 700 baptized members, has been scattered in a modern-day diaspora from which it struggles to recover even today. We learned that 90% of the members of *Gethsemane* were evacuated and have not returned--because there is almost nothing to which they can return. Their homes are gone, their businesses washed away, the schools are closed. *Gethsemane's* Pastor, Jim Shears, now lives in Memphis with his family. He commutes to Chalmette each weekend to lead worship for the faithful remnant of 45 who are left to restore the church. While in Chalmette, he lives in a FEMA trailer in behind the church.

The community's sanctuary was so badly destroyed by Katrina that they worshipped in a tent for months. Yet, amid all of the surrounding—and persistent--devastation, *Gethsemane* has begun to rebuild. With the help of generous volunteers, the sanctuary is almost restored. During our visit, beautiful stained glass glowed in the afternoon sun that shone through the windows. Folding chairs were gathered in a semi-circle around a raw, wooden altar platform. In front of those chairs were eight tiny chairs for children, a sign that even now, this community has hope for the future.

Outside the sanctuary stood a large white tent. It might have been the tent in which the community had worshipped for so long. A plywood sign with orange spray paint stood at the front. It read, "Tent Open." The tent was indeed open, unattended, and available to anyone who needed what the church had to give. Inside the tent were an outpouring of clothes, shoes, suits, toys, books, and bibles. The church itself was unlocked and unattended. Like a church in medieval times, this modern sanctuary was open and unguarded. It was available to anyone who wanted to enter, to pray, and to ponder why this church was surviving when so many had not. Remarkably, in a community desperate for building supplies, the supplies being used to rebuild *Gethsemane* were stacked throughout the open building, but they were not disturbed. Pastor Palmer observed that, to the community of Chalmette, the rebuilding of *Gethsemane* was a sign of such hope that it would have been sacrilege to steal the supplies needed to finish the church--and so no one had taken even a nail.

We found the song *Step by Step* in the sanctuary as we prayed. It seemed so appropriate that we gathered to sing it together. The lyrics are below. They describe very well how the people of *Gethsemane* must have made it through this terrible time:

### *Step by Step*

Oh God, you are my God, and I will ever praise you.  
Oh God, you are my God, and I will ever praise you.  
I will seek you in the morning, and I will learn to walk in your ways.  
And step by step you'll lead me.  
And I will follow you all of my days.

*Gethsemane*, like so many of the churches in New Orleans, is struggling to be a resurrection church. It teeters on the brink of the financial disaster the physical disaster wrought by Katrina's destruction. This is a community whose pastor cannot live among them full time. Yet, even now, *Gethsemane* is reaching beyond itself to minister to its wounded community. Aptly named after the location of Jesus' agonized prayer in the garden, *Gethsemane Lutheran Church* has embraced its own agony and has begun to move beyond it. Step by step, it has emerged to be a beacon of hope, prayer and faith to a devastated community where so many still struggle to survive.

From the ELCA Prayer Vigil:

Let us pray for the congregation of *Gethsemane Lutheran Church*, and for all who lived in *Chalmette*.

(reflect silently)

Gracious and loving God, our hope in times of loss: we pray for all who once lived in this community and who lost homes, property and livelihoods. As you earnestly prayed in the Garden of *Gethsemane* for strength to face the trials ahead, we pray for all who face challenging and difficult days of rebuilding and recovery. May they know your comfort, strength, and hope for the future. In Christ's name we pray, Amen.



#7  
LUTHERAN CHURCH OF THE GALILEAN  
LA PLACE, LA

Jeremiah 29:11-12 "'For I know the plans I have for you,' declares the Lord. 'Plans to prosper you and not to harm you. Plans to give you hope and a future. Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you.'"

This morning, we visited Lutheran Church of the Galilean in LaPlace, Louisiana. We shared our "Pray" Bible Study with them, joined them for worship, and had a lovely pot luck lunch afterward. This small church, though it faces a profound financial crisis, is filled with hope and energy.

The problems at Galilean are different than those we encountered in New Orleans, but they are no less profound. The church itself was not badly damaged in the storm, but many of its former members have dispersed.

They have a beautiful, gem of a sanctuary. It is adorned with beautiful stained glass and lovely banners--but the debt incurred to build it has become a stumbling block to their ministry, and is now a threat to their existence. There is something of a mystery about why they've not paid the debt, and why their finances have become so acutely difficult in recent years, but it is clear that if the larger church does not step up and support this community, it will likely die. The amount needed to keep it alive seems modest by the standards of need we've seen during this pilgrimage--so one wonders why financial support has not been forthcoming.

The Galilean community, like so many churches in this area, is without a permanent pastor. An Associate in Ministry, Todd LaGrange, leads them. Todd is a gifted young man who has assumed a sort of "battlefield" commission to lead this church through a time of crisis that was only partly created by the devastation of Katrina. Their previous pastor, who had been there many years, had accepted another call and was to serve his last Sunday with them on the day that Katrina hit. After the storm subsided, their pastor was gone to his new call - and the faithful of the community were left to muddle through on their own.

Their congregational president, Carl, shared with us the story of that first Sunday after Katrina. He and some of the other lay people called to check on the members of their

community. They invited those who were still there to come to worship on Sunday. Others, whose churches had been destroyed, joined them that first Sunday in their sanctuary--which had suffered only minor damage. Those who gathered that morning began by sharing their stories--stories of loss, love of family, and gratitude for safety. Out of the sharing of those stories grew a sense of connection and hope. They then joined together to read the readings from the lectionary, they sang hymns, and they prayed for one another. The church went on, because the faithful had gathered and persevered through their grief.

In some ways, it seems that the Church of the Galilean still struggles to move past that "first Sunday" experience. They are still without a full-time minister. Today, they learned that a pastor to whom they'd extended a call had declined the invitation to come there to serve. Without a full time-pastor, the sense of instability in the community continues to interfere with efforts to resolve their financial situation. It also impedes their efforts to grow their ministry (though the area around them is filled with new homes and schools), and tempers their hope for the future. Yet, even in the midst of crisis, there is great joy and energy in this community. Their readings in worship are presented by their young people. Their prayers come from within the congregation. They lift up the names of everyone in need, and speak them aloud, so that the community prays together for the needs of all. The hymns are sung loudly and with gusto. The sharing of the sacrament is profound and reverent. After worship, the members of the church provided us with a potluck lunch that overflowed with good food, abundance, and care for one another.

Before we left, we presented them with the gift of a wrought iron cross. On the back of it, we'd inscribed the chapter and verse from Jeremiah that I set out in part, above. It was particularly meaningful to them, and they were touched by the gift. The full passage is below. Please reflect on it, pray over it, and discern the plans God has for you to prosper:

Jeremiah 29:11-14

"For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you," declares the Lord," and will bring you back from captivity. I will gather you from all the nations and places where I have banished you," declares the Lord, "and will bring you back to the place from which I carried you into exile."

The people of Galilean told us today that they have been given three years to survive. Please pray that they will find positive ways to envision this three year period. Our Lord had three years in which to conduct his public ministry, and his work was complete in that short amount of time. Help the Galilean community see this period as their "three years to thrive." Pray that Todd LaGrange will be strengthened in his discernment, his patience, and his wisdom. Pray also that God will send him help, in the form of a permanent pastor, to share the enormous responsibility thrust upon him to lead this congregation. Pray that Carl, and the other leaders at Galilean, will find ways to re-focus the life of this church on ministry, in the confidence that the money will come as ministry flourishes. Pray, finally, that the larger church will hear the needs of the Church of the Galilean and relieve its financial burden, so that it may "return from its exile" and prosper as a beacon of hope for the community around it.

#8



#### THE JOURNEY HOME

As we drive into Houston from our journey, Pastor Palmer has suggested that we compose our own hymn to commemorate our pilgrimage. This echoed a suggestion by Pastor Dick Hardel during our "Living Faith - Pray" kickoff event.

Our "hymn" is below. You can recite it, or sing it, to the tune of *Amazing Grace*:

#### Verse One

Pray-er, Pil-grim, Bump-y, Jour-ney,  
Road Map, Pa-rade, Hope-ful.  
Ninth Ward, Tra-gic, Qui-et, De-stroyed,  
Cour-age, Sheet Rock, Faith-ful.

#### Verse Two

Storm Surge, Le-vee, Ca-nal, Rem-nant,  
Ber-nice, Ha-rold, Re-mus.  
Cross-es, Lake-view, Chal-mette, La Place.  
Please Come, Please Help. A-men