

Contending for the Faith
Matthew 19:1-12; Jude 1-4

Most natural disasters are sudden and unexpected. Earthquakes take everyone by surprise and are over in seconds. It is precisely the immediacy of the release of such power that causes such incredible devastation. Tornadoes are equally unpredictable – they form and disappear without any apparent logic. They seem to be capricious, digging a path of destruction miles long, and then suddenly leaving the ground, sparing other houses from what would have been certain doom. The sustained fury of hurricanes may be more easily tracked, but they have been known to alter their course and to increase or reduce the power of their winds without any apparent reason. And when the storm has passed, the devastation is over, even if the cleanup can be considerable.

But river flooding is different. Weeks in advance, the height of the water and the date of its crest can be predicted with tolerable accuracy. As a result, those in the path of the flood know without a doubt that it is coming, but there's very little that anyone can do about it.

But perhaps the strangest thing about river flooding is how incongruous it is to its surroundings. In Mississippi we have been having a rather dry month – I am told that farmers would like to have a half inch of rain or so on their crops. Locally, we have been recently blessed with sunny, breezy, beautiful days.

And yet the water which fell long ago in the form of snow up north has been steadily, inexorably making its way toward us, bringing unimaginable destruction in its wake. Moreover, once the river has risen, the high water will remain for day after day, for there is nowhere for it to go. Its effects are not permanent, but they are incredibly long-lasting.

It is that sort of disaster – slow moving, predictable, and long-lasting – that has hit the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Ever since we established a nation-wide standard that officers of the church live lives of chastity in singleness or fidelity in marriage, opponents of these requirements have been working tirelessly for their removal. At meeting after meeting of the General Assembly, they have gained ground. Since last fall, presbytery after presbytery has voted to approve their efforts. And on May 10, Twin Cities Presbytery in Minnesota provided the final necessary vote to put them over the top. As a result, on July 10, sessions and presbyteries will have the right to ordain people to office in the church who refuse to repent of sin, even the sort of sin that not too long ago was considered simply unmentionable.

How in the world could such a thing happen in the Presbyterian Church? Didn't God create human beings male and female, to live in the covenant of marriage between one man and one woman? Didn't God Himself command us not to commit adultery, thundering from the top of Mt. Sinai that His people must keep their marriage vows? Didn't our Lord Jesus repeat these teachings in our reading from Matthew 19 today? How could anyone who claims to be a Christian imagine that God has somehow changed His mind about marriage?

Well, just as is the case with river flooding, the problem actually started long ago and far away. Even before the turn of the 20th century, professors in Presbyterian seminaries began

telling their students that, in the light of modern scientific discoveries, the Bible is no longer trustworthy. Instead of clinging to the faith, the truth that Jude says was once delivered unto the saints, they and their students began to believe and to teach that the Bible is just a set of ancient stories and legends, written by fallible people just like you and me. They said we have no way of knowing whether God really spoke the Ten Commandments or that Jesus really said the things Matthew recorded. In sum, they placed their faith in science rather than in Scripture. Instead of bowing the knee to King Jesus, calling themselves His servants as Jude does, they have remained self-confident and proud in their academic achievements, determining what is true according to their own imaginations and their own desires.

Their theological descendents have continued to do the same thing. As the culture has become more and more accepting of same-sex relationships, many Presbyterians have tagged right along, abandoning the clear Word of God, and instead embracing the findings of psychologists. In the name of science, they have embraced what Jude calls a culture of lewdness, a culture of lasciviousness.

In Jude's time, the false teachers had also crept into the Church unnoticed, just as all those snowflakes fell so softly, so quietly, so many months ago, so far away. But eventually their poisonous teachings have gained strength, as more and more ordained ministers have believed less and less firmly in the authority of Scripture. The raindrops of unfaithfulness have beaten down steadily in more and more presbyteries, in faraway places. And now the devastation has come to us.

Make no mistake – the rain of infidelity has not, for the most part, fallen here. The Presbytery of Mississippi has been generally faithful to uphold Biblical standards of morality. Time and time again, we have sent overtures to the General Assembly, urging faithfulness to the teachings of Jesus. Just this week, we have received into our membership two new ordinands who publically professed their faith in Christ and their devotion to His Word in the Scriptures. This problem is not of our own making.

But it has come to us, just as surely as the floodwaters have. And it is because of our faithfulness to the Scriptures that the waters of infidelity will cause much more damage here than they did in the places on which they initially fell. It is our conservative congregations that many people will leave, searching for another denomination that is truer to the Divine Word of God. It is our pastors whose consciences will be stricken, and who will find it more and more difficult to remain in fellowship with those we consider to be unfaithful.

So, what do we need to do? Just as is the case with this flood, our tactics will largely be determined by our individual circumstances. Some Bible-believing Christians will find themselves in congregations with unfaithful pastors. Some Bible-believing pastors will find themselves marooned in unfaithful presbyteries. These will eventually have no choice but to leave, just as those in the lowest areas of the floodplain immediately had to seek higher ground. If the majority of a congregation or a presbytery is determined to follow the teaching of what Jude calls "ungodly men," there's very little that can be done. The Book of Order no longer prevents them from spreading such lies.

But what about those members of congregations with pastors who believe in the Scriptures? What about those pastors who are blessed to serve in presbyteries that are still seeking to follow the teachings of the Lord Jesus? What about those who are higher up in the floodplain?

It might be possible for us to build a levee – to construct a dry place in the midst of the water, a place where faithful Christians and pastors and congregations can gather. It might be possible to define ourselves in opposition to the coming changes in our denomination, to insist that, at least in our little corner, we will continue to preach what is right and to teach what is right and to believe what is right.

It might be possible, behind our little levee, for us to continue to proclaim, as Jude says, the things that concern our common salvation, the good news of Jesus Christ that, in spite of our sins, no, because of our sins, Jesus gave Himself up for us, becoming a sacrifice that all who trust in Him might be forgiven and saved.

For no matter what happens, that remains the good news. It doesn't matter what any of us have done or left undone. It doesn't matter whether our sins are socially acceptable or if they are the kinds of things we tremble at the thought of anyone else discovering.

Oh, sure, others may say that what the Bible teaches about sin isn't true anymore, and never was true. Others may say that, in our modern, enlightened world, sin doesn't require repentance anymore. But they can't change the good news that, for those who trust in Christ, all our sins, past, present, and future are in fact wiped away by the blood of His cross.

And as Jude says in verse 1, this salvation is totally of God. It is God Who calls His people, giving us new ears to hear the good news, giving us new hearts to respond to Him in faith instead of fear. And it is God who sanctifies us. God declares all who trust in Christ to be not only forgiven but cleansed, made holy and righteous in His sight. God does this because He not only imputes our sin to Christ, placing the blame for all the evil we have ever done on Jesus. God also imputes the righteousness of Christ to all who trust in Him, declaring us to be in perfect alignment with His will.

But God doesn't stop there. For our sanctification is not just a matter of God declaring us to be holy. It also involves God making us holy, day by day molding and shaping us more and more into the likeness of Christ.

Oh, sure, some may argue that it is impossible for some people to change. They may say that some people are just born with certain unnatural desires, and thus that the church needs to accept these people just the way they are, not expecting them to leave their sin behind.

And yes, the good news is that by the power of Christ all who trust in Him are saved, just as we are. But it is also true that by the power of Christ, all who trust in Him do not remain just as we are. Instead, as we are filled with His Holy Spirit, the sinful, twisted parts of our lives are gradually straightened out. By the power of Christ, all those who trust in Him are being made into the holy people God has already declared us to be.

And it is by the power of Christ that all His people are preserved. The good news is that God does not leave us to face the trials and temptations of this life alone. For the Holy Spirit

within us is not just an agent of our sanctification. He is also a comforter, One Who gives us strength to overcome challenges that, in our own strength, we would be powerless to face. He is a counselor, the One Who blesses us with the wisdom of God when we have difficult choices to make. Because all who trust in Jesus Christ are in Jesus Christ, part of His body, we are freed from the power of sin and death, new creatures at liberty to follow God's perfect law of love, free to worship, free to serve.

And make no mistake, we will need that sort of preservation in the days to come. It is very likely that the waters of infidelity will remain within the Presbyterian Church for a long, long time. It is possible that some congregations and some presbyteries will never recover from the damage that such false teachings inevitably cause. Some Presbyterians will never be able to go home to the congregations that they once loved.

It is even possible that the little levees we try to build around ourselves in Mississippi will fail. It is possible that, in one way or another, we too will have to seek another home on higher ground.

But the good news is that the God Who has called us, and the God Who has sanctified us will also be the God Who preserves us in Jesus Christ. May we be faithful to Him as He has been faithful to us, contending for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints.