

Commentary: A faith to weather the storm

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WASHINGTON (RNS) — “Faith to weather life’s storms.” The phrase evokes the cliché sentimentality of greeting cards you might send to a bereaved friend.

But many believers are quite upfront about the fact that religion sustains them not just through the day-to-day, but especially in “seasons of distress and grief,” as the old hymn goes.

The storm metaphor translates into all manner of difficult situations: pain, brokenness, loss and so on.

But how does faith speak to the storms of life that are literal?

This question comes into sharp focus as a massive tropical storm [inundates a populous coastal area](#) with endless rain and epic flooding.

Before, during and after dangerous weather events, dearly held beliefs face profound challenges.

What do we pray for when a hurricane approaches? That God will make storms dissipate? That it will go hit somewhere else — maybe someplace less populated? That loss of life be limited? That people will respond with justice and kindness?

In moments like these, our conceptions of who and what God is are laid bare: Either he can change nature or he cannot. Either he will, or he will not.

It is easy to see God in the heroic rescue of frightened children from a

flooded house. It is more difficult to see him in the fate of people who did not make it out alive.

In any case, many people believe God calls them to help their fellow man in the aftermath of life's storms.



Evacuee Will Sutton holds his 11-month son, Jayden, at the Lakewood Church in Houston on Aug. 29, 2017. Joel Osteen and his congregation have set up their church as a shelter for evacuees from the flooding by Hurricane Harvey. (AP Photo / LM Otero via RNS)

When disasters occur, faith groups are almost always among the first on the scene with resources and manpower.

One little-known fact about American religious communities is that many are mobilized for immediate disaster relief. Through denominations and other organizational networks, faith groups leverage their scale and proximity to play a key role in the aftermath of storms.

The ordinary quibbles over religious doctrine and practice suddenly seem much less important. If someone is pulling me or my loved ones to safety

from rising floodwaters, I do not much care if she is a Christian or a Muslim or an atheist.

And while I have opinions about ideal levels of state funding for emergency preparedness and disaster relief, in my moment of rescue it does not matter if the person helping me is a government worker or a volunteer.

Americans across political and cultural lines contribute to relief and recovery. Some show up, some send money, and many more send prayers.

Yet even when we come together as a people to begin the work of relief and recovery, our religious prejudices and hostilities are never fully subdued.

Houston megachurch pastor Joel Osteen received [harsh criticism](#) across the internet in the wake of the storm for not immediately opening his church, which was formerly a NBA arena, as a shelter.

But it was not initially clear even to Osteen's critics that it was safe or advisable to house displaced persons in the complex. The implication is that, since Osteen is a prosperity-gospel heretic and a very wealthy man, it is right to deride him for not doing more to help his city.

I would be the last person to defend Osteen as a faithful expositor of Christian truth. However, as a fellow citizen I sympathize with a leader who undoubtedly has many in his flock who are under water.

The massive congregation may yet do significant storm recovery work, long after its online detractors stop judging and keeping score.

It is important to assume good faith in bad times. Soon enough, our collective attention will move on from Texas' floods. We can resume our never-ending debates about religion and politics.

But for now, it is time to love our neighbor. Hopefully it is not too old-fashioned to think that's what religious faith demands — before and after

the storm.

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