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## FIRST-PERSON: Despite the flooding, 'Blessed be His glorious name'

by Marilyn Stewart, posted Wednesday, October 12, 2005 (13 years ago)

NEW ORLEANS (BP)--After salvaging what we could from our flooded faculty home on the campus of New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, my husband, son and I headed to our church. We had heard reports and knew that we couldn't leave town without seeing for ourselves what had happened to Edgewater Baptist Church.

My husband, Bob Stewart, is serving as interim pastor, his second time to do so in the seven years we have been members. As my husband likes to say, he is more than just the interim pastor, he is a member. Edgewater is very dear to us.

As we drove through the Gentilly area, down Fillmore Street toward Paris Avenue, we could see that the damage to the neighborhood was substantial. But as we topped the Fillmore Street bridge over the canal and got the first glimpse of the neighborhood around Edgewater, my heart stopped. "Scorched earth" is a term that comes to mind.

The distinction between dirt and vegetation was gone. Every building, every car, every plant was the same grayish-brown, lifeless color. Each street was just another row of abandoned homes with a water mark touching the gables.

Naively, I had assumed we would need the church key to get into the building. Instead, a block from the church we could see broken windows and doors standing askew. It had the look of a long-abandoned building.

Inside, sludge, mud and mold covered the halls from top to bottom. There was a bizarre feel to the recently painted preschool hall as bits of its white cloud and blue sky mural peeked through the awful gunk left by murky water.

Each preschool room was an upheaval of children's furniture, toys and sippee cups so covered in mold that they were almost beyond recognition. The nursery was a mound of dirty linen, with one crib stacked on top of another. It was difficult to picture this as the same place where dozens of children played happily in our weekday preschool.

My camcorder was running as we walked brokenheartedly through the church office and through the kitchen where our French Quarter ministry had prepared so many Sunday meals for our homeless congregation. But when we reached the sanctuary, I turned off the camera.

Words and pictures cannot capture the stench, the uncontainable mold, the shadows and eerie silence, and the overwhelming sense of loss we felt as we stepped into the sanctuary. I learned that it is possible to weep while wearing an industrial-grade, toxic-mold-resistant face mask.

The sanctuary was a scrapheap of pews, Bibles and hymnals. Every pew had been ripped from its moorings and the room had clearly been a swirling soup of debris.

The pedal board from the organ had settled in the choir loft. The end of a pew rested on top of the piano. Pots and pans from the kitchen and the organ bench were at the bottom of the baptistery. The podium was at the exit and the Lord's Supper table sat in the center of the room, under the chandelier, supporting a coffeepot from the kitchen.

Water had risen several inches above the door frames and reached halfway up the stained glass windows on the south side of the church, breaking them out. The strings of the baby grand piano were rusted and had snapped as the sounding board swelled with water.

Ugly mold covered the banners in the choir loft by the baptistery that read, "King of Kings and Lord of Lords." The defilement seemed blasphemous.

Ironically, only the three folding chairs lined up against the back wall and a folding chair leaning against the wall behind the piano were apparently unmoved by the ravaging water.

In the fellowship hall, folding chairs remained lined up in perfect rows, Sunday School ready. The sludge and rust were the only clues that they, too, had been submerged for days.

Personal loss has been great as well.

Nick, a seminary student and one most faithful to our ministry, had returned to the campus to retrieve what he could of his young family's possessions. He drove onto campus with a trailer. He left with a single chair.

Stories similar to his seem endless. So many in our congregation have lost homes and possessions. All of us have been displaced. For a few, the flood was just the latest in a series of trials or losses.

Yet, the words we had sung so many times as a congregation played over and over in my mind as we walked through the church. "...As the darkness closes in, Lord, still I will say, Blessed be the name of the Lord, Blessed be Your glorious name. You give and take away ... my heart will choose to say, Blessed be the name of the Lord."

It was in the sanctuary that I realized why the loss of the church disturbed me more than even the loss of my own possessions. The network of support that we relied on in time of crisis had been breached. We were not there to comfort each other.

My husband and children and I are together and safe. But my church family is scattered and in need. The community we had ministered to, prayed for, begged the Lord for is hurting, and we can't be there to help.

Jim Shaddix, our pastor until following the Lord to another place of ministry this year, had led our church to conclude our services with the prayer, "Lord, give us this city and do it in such a way that only You get the credit."

Under Pastor Jim's leadership we came to celebrate when one of our laymen or students moved away, viewing it as a way for Edgewater to touch the world. Each member left with a commission to be an ambassador for Christ on behalf of Edgewater Baptist Church.

We broadened our prayer to say, "Lord, give us the nations and do it in such a way that only You get the credit."

Those who left our congregation were "the church scattered," and we sent them out as missionaries. Each of us is now, literally, part of the scattered church. I pray that we can accept this as our commissioning service.

Our building likely will be condemned, our parsonage is severely damaged, our congregation is dispersed. If we see the commitment of lives in our city to Christ through this surreal turn of events, it will have been done in such a way that only the Lord will get the credit.

If we can show others the way to Christ as we are scattered across the nation, it will have been done His way.

May God grant me the grace to accept how He has chosen to answer our prayer and to say, "Blessed be His glorious name."

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