

OUT OF CONTROL

1 Corinthians 6:12-20

These past few months, as I've been watching the daily news, I've noticed a strange parallel in the stories – one that I bet many of you have not considered.

On the one hand there are the stunning stories of the world's natural forces wreaking havoc upon people and property and human settlements. Last week I watched scenes of mudslides in California rolling down the hills and snatching cars and homes and people in its path. At last count some 17 were dead, unexpectedly – 40 or more are still missing -- and even some celebrities like Ellen DeGeneres and Oprah Winfrey were affected.

But just few weeks before that, it wasn't mudslides, it was the raging fires passing through the dry foliage and rolling hills of California, burning thousands and thousands of acres, including so many homes. Relatives of mine who live nearby described the smoke in the air as darkening the sun and leaving a layer of ash everywhere.

Then there were the unbelievably cold temperatures which froze pipes and caused flooding and other mechanical failures all over the country – even here at Beautiful Savior a plugged drainage tube caused a backup in the library. Even Niagara Falls was frozen.

A few months before there were hurricanes Harvey and Irene causing massive overflows, horrific damage and tragic loss of life along the Gulf Coast and up the eastern seaboard.

Who can even remember the stories from the early part of last year? Over and over again, it seems, the power of the fallen earth shows that it can undo in seconds what has taken humans decades and billions to erect.

Out of control. Weather and nature moves powerfully and spins violently. Unharnessed, it could easily topple fortresses and shelters. That's one story. Natural disaster.

But then there's the other. And it also has to do with "out of control." But this time it has nothing to do with weather. It's out-of-control people. Abusers. Manipulators. Oppressors. The stories rumble through the news day after day about those whose hormones raged and whose passions plundered. They went about their business without restraint and without integrity,

allowing their bodies to rule the day as they misused and mistreated – as they trounced and pounced –as they used popularity, power, prestige and position to have their way.

From the highest echelons of government to the media moguls of Hollywood to the athletic role models in professional sports to the well-known preachers on the air – not to mention the countless others who are NOT famous, they did, behind closed doors, in secret -- things that betray a fallen heart – a heart led by impulse and desire rather than by faith and principle.

And now the secrets are being revealed. The laundry bin is open and the air is reeking with the smell of lust and pride and greed and sin. And left in the wake is a scene much like those mudslides last week. Fallen homes and families, broken hearts and shattered dreams.

Out of control. Swirling and spinning, to and fro. The fallen heart, like fallen nature will also swirl and twirl and bring unspeakable horror and tragic pain.

Two stories that coalesce: the power of the fallen earth and the power of the fallen heart.

Now, you and I both know that we have no control over fallen nature. There is nothing we can do, aside from prayer, that will put a halt to the swirling, grinding power of earthquakes and floods, mudslides and cyclones, tidal waves and pestilence, freezing cold and scorching heat. Since the time of Adam's fall, the earth has been the bearer of hardship and pain because it, too, was infected by our first parents' rebellion against God. As God said to Adam: "Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food...."

The fallen earth wants to engulf us, but God, in His grace, keeps it from doing so. In Christ, He has redeemed the hopelessly lost condition of Creation, and so He puts His shield of protection around us and holds us close to His heart. And even when He allows those storms and struggles to break through, even when He permits hard and dark days, He is there to strengthen us in weakness and help us pick up the pieces.

So, a proper attitude toward the powerful forces of nature? Put your hands together, bow your heads, recognize that only He can harness its power, and lay yourself before Him in faith.

This is what I see from so many as they look at what's left behind. They lift up their eyes to the hills and declare, "God is my refuge and strength. He saved me, not on the basis of deeds which I have done, but according to His mercy. And so, in Jesus, He is my fortress and deliverer." And indeed He is, and He will bless them in their loss and somehow rebuild their lives.

But then there's the other "out of control." And this is the one St. Paul addresses in our text. He says, "Everything is permissible for me"--but not everything is beneficial. 'Everything is permissible for me'--but I will not be mastered by anything. 'Food for the stomach and the stomach for food'--but God will destroy them both. The body is not meant for sexual immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body. By his power God raised the Lord from the dead, and he will raise us also. Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ himself? Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body."

Clearly God calls us to live in such a way as to be above reproach – to glorify Him not only in our words but in every step we take. After all, He declares that He lives within us. That in Christ He has rescued us and called us out of darkness and into His marvelous light.

The modern trend had been to say, "Give in to your passions. Do what you want. Live as you please. You are the master of your destiny. You are the king of your universe. Life is what you make it. So live it up. You only live once."

It's an evolutionary mantra – to think that there is no future – to think that whatever pleasure is to be gotten or joy to be attained must come in the here and now.

But now we've been seeing that this mindset is a path to destruction – an ugly road that leaves a trail of pain and suffering in its wake. A trail of tears.

But, let's be fair, it's not only the path of some rich and famous out-of-control folk, it is also the path all of us would leave if we were left on our own. Because, you see, by nature we too are creatures of darkness. We, too, like our first parents, want to be gods unto ourselves.

But Jesus Christ came to change all that. When He died, He put to death that inner, selfish demon who rumbles like an earthquake and spins like a cyclone. He said, “Come here, Devil, come here, Sin, come here Death! Do your worst, to ME.” And they did.

And the trail of destruction left behind was His own body and blood given and shed on the cross of Calvary. Lifeless. Broken. Beaten. Jesus gave it all for you and me.

And then, just when all hope seemed gone, just when the storm brought utter desolation and destruction.... up, up, up He arose, conquering sin and Satan, conquering the world and our sinful human nature, and declaring to all who believe on Him that there is new life – there is hope – there is forgiveness – there is eternity.

On Pentecost, nearly 2000 years ago, Jesus showed His incredible power over all the forces of evil by pouring out the Holy Spirit upon His disciples. And from that moment on, the incredible dynamite – the Holy Spirit – began to fill God’s people with His fruit of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. And all of us who believe in Christ Jesus are heirs of this fruit.

Let me say this: If you and I are to keep our closets clean and our integrity intact, it will not come by sheer force of our will, by gritting our teeth in determination, by vowing to be good and faithful and to serve the Lord. It won’t happen that way.

But it will happen when we bow our heads and realize that God Himself lives within us. We are His temple. And when that Spirit enables us to surrender ourselves and open the way for Jesus’ love to flow through us, then amazing things will happen.

Jay is a friend of mine from Milwaukee. He has been tugging and pulling against God for many years. I first met him when he tried to swindle me out of money with lies about his family. I later shared Jesus with him when he was imprisoned years later. In 2007 he was baptized into Christ.

But Jay continued to struggle. He has the desire to follow God, but the ways of the world keep tugging at him to go another direction.

About five years ago he got into trouble again and nearly lost his life when he was beaten up outside a casino. For months he could not talk and breathed through a tube. I visited him through this time, and, within a few years he was able to walk and talk again.

I ministered to him, but soon, again, we fell out of touch. I feared that he had gone astray.

A few weeks ago I had a dream about Jay – that he was calling my name. And when I went into the office the next day, sure enough, wasn't there a message on the answering machine from him. I hadn't heard for him in over a year, so the coincidence was just too great to ignore.

I spoke with Jay, and we are meeting this week for lunch. He asked me why I thought God spared his life and I told him that God's Spirit has more work to do – that God is calling him to love and serve Him.

That's the way the Spirit works. When the storms come, He is ready to clean up, to repair, to renew. And when things are repaired, He stays with us to help keep them on track.

May God's Spirit work mightily in you, every day. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.