

SERIES: HOW SHALL WE LIVE
SERMON: WE SHALL BE LIKE HIM
SCRIPTURE: 1 JOHN 3:1-3

April 14, 2024
Rev. Karen H Roberts

1 See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are. The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. 2 Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is. 3 And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure.

Last week was filled with such vastly different emotions. There was the joy of starting the week with learning Tim's deployment was delayed and he could come home for one more week. Then Thursday there was the initial excitement of he and I standing at the window watching a tornado form, to a few minutes of concern as we sheltered in the basement and heard the dreaded noises of destruction happening outside, to the wave of fear and anticipated heartbreak that hit when we rushed to the bottom of the hill and saw the church for the first time...seeing nothing but a wall of tangled trees and having no idea, at first, what the building beneath would look like. Then came new emotions: the joy of finding a Girl Scout Troop sheltered in the hallway, unharmed even though they had been just beside one of the giant trees that fell. The relief of pushing through the debris to find the building looked intact. The moments of wonder as we marveled at the power of the wind, and we found ourselves looking through debris trying to decide if we were picking up pieces of our church or of someone else's home.

When all of those emotions calmed down and I was able to turn my eyes elsewhere, I saw beyond our own parsonage and church...and I saw that we had neighbors that were not so lucky. I saw trees down on homes, I heard the sirens, knowing that some might have been injured, or that there might be other places hit harder. My emotions then turned to a bit of guilt. As I marveled at how one large tree fell perfectly between two brick walls and didn't so much as scuff them...or how the large tree next to the road, by any reasonable guesses should be laying in our sanctuary right now, fell across the road instead...

There is always the desire to see those wonders and think, "God's hand guided this." "God must love us," "God surely blessed us." But then, we have to stop and wonder what that sounds like to our neighbors who weren't so lucky...who didn't get the perceived miracle of perfect tree placement and instead have had their homes condemned because of the damage those winds inflicted. Was God not with them? Did God not want to bless them? I was reminded of the story in the Bible of when Elijah wanted to see God and God placed him in the crevice of a mountain and a storm blew through, but Elijah saw that God was not in the wind...God was not in the thunder...God was in the gentle quiet that followed.

I believe, as Elijah discovered and as the First Letter of John explains, that we are God's children...that we are deeply loved and wonderfully blessed, but that God's love and blessing had very little to do with where trees fell and how buildings were spared...and it

has everything to do with the gentle quiet that followed. As the winds calmed, the thunder faded, the lightning eased...God showed up.

God showed up in the quick response of the police dept and fire department where were already at our church before Tim and I could even get down the hill. God showed up in linemen of Duke Energy who worked all night and into the next night to repair poles, lines, and restore power. God showed up in how many of them stopped by to reassure us and offer suggestions for how to clean up the huge mess we had.

God's love and blessing came when Hal Wilson showed up. Friends, Hal is your Trustee liaison and I will tell you, I don't know how I would have navigated these past two days without his gentle spirit and his willingness to work so hard to get things done. I am so grateful to walk alongside him.

God's love and blessing showed up when a knock at my door reveled a team from Samaritan's Purse disaster response...a team of very young interns and apprentices...who came to my home to help. Within a couple of hours, you almost couldn't tell we had been hit...every twig was picked up, my roof was tarped to prevent further damage, and even the driveways was swept and cleared. God's love and blessing came in this team of kids from California, Michigan, Texas, Florida, and North Carolina.

God's miracle showed up, not in the way the trees fell, but in the nudge he gave to a young woman named Katie, who had visited our church before but on Friday felt led by God to come see the damage make the most extraordinary offer – Her husband and his best friend work for a tree service...she made a phone call and they showed up on Saturday with all their equipment and volunteered for 7 or 8 hours of hard labor to clear the two biggest trees and get our building open again.

God's love and blessing was evident when the Thornton family showed up and jumped in to help...at one point I even saw they had their one week old granddaughter in tow and their grandson was out picking up branches. God showed up when Ed Snyder did...when Thomas Snyder did. There may have been others that came when I stepped away for rest, I'm sorry if you were here and I didn't acknowledge you, but God's love and blessing showed up with every text of encouragement and every message that said, "Do you need anything?"

God showed up when yet another crew from Samaritan's Purse came up with heavy equipment to move the massive pile of debris and get our church back open and ready to fulfill our mission.

God's love and blessing showed up...not just for you...but through you. We had two events planned at our church this weekend. One was to host a Red Cross Smoke Detector placement event on Saturday. God showed up through the hands and feet of our sister church, Union Grove UMC, who offered their facility so we could move that event there and allow the work day to move forward.

God's love and blessing showed up when on this side of the church a massive cleanup was under way, while on this side of the church people were gathered to raise money for cancer research, hosted by our Relay for Life team.

What I'm trying to say is, God showed up...God's love showed up...not in the wind...not in the felled trees, not in the damaged roofs...but in the hands and feet of those who showed up and looked like Jesus...

This is what John's letter is encouraging the church to see. You, church, are claimed by God...you are children of God...you are loved by God and that love is not a love that protects us from bad things...but a love that serves as a firm foundation when bad things happen...when our world is shaken and we need a solid force upon which to stand.

John reminds us that God's love isn't something poured out in life favors...but God's love is a transforming power that helps us to be like Jesus...to look like Jesus...to act like Jesus.

When we think of Jesus we think of Jesus the healer, the prayer warrior, the one who seeks justice, shares his table with saint and sinner alike, the one who forgives and sacrifices and loves with patience and grace.

In the past three days, Jesus has been revealed in the healing, praying, sacrificial love of friends and strangers alike. John says those who have hope in this purify themselves. We often think of purity as perfection, having no flaws, but to purify ourselves means to rid ourselves of pollution. Pollution is something that makes an environment unsuitable or unsafe. As I watched all these beautiful strangers clearing the debris from our church, I thought of how we purify ourselves by removing the things that hinder beauty...things that lead to ugliness, things that get in the way of our purpose, things that alter our lives in negative ways.

To purify ourselves as Christ is pure means we remove the things from our lives that are not like Christ...we clear the debris...the things that divide us rather than unify us...we clear hate, judgment, condemnation, selfishness, from our lives so we can simply love and be loved.

And that, my precious friends, is the miracle. It isn't about where a tree fell, it is all about how love rises. It rises in the heart of God's people and unites us. There was so much that could have divided us this week – a stubborn streak of independence, theological differences, selfishness – yet we let love show us a different kind of miracle...one in which nothing matters except how we care for one another...how we can be the hands and feet of Jesus for one another...how we shall be like him...loved and blessed so that we can go out loving and blessing. There...that is our miracle...that we shall be like him.

Thanks be to God.