“God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in time of trouble.” Psalm 46:1

As I write these words Hurricane Irma is at category 5 and headed for South Florida, having already swiped the side of Puerto Rico and bringing destruction and death to islands in Caribbean. All this comes on the heels of Hurricane Harvey with winds that hit southern Texas and then immense rain totals that flooded Houston.

While the media has focused upon the Hurricanes to the south, my bishop colleague in Montana cried out, “don’t forget about us, we are burning up.” Indeed prolonged drought has made the area ripe for fires and much of northwest, especially eastern Washington, northern Idaho and Montana. These places are burning up. Over 1 million acres, an area larger than Rhode Island, already has burned in Montana alone.

Our hearts are touched by the suffering these natural disasters bring and people of compassion are rightly moved to want to help. But how shall we help?

Prayer is at the top of the list. I know that sometimes the word “I’m praying for you” may sound glib and may act as an excuse for not really doing anything. But in the midst of disasters, when all hell seems to be breaking lose around us and the very foundations of people’s lives are being ripped from under them, we and those suffering need help believing that God is truly our Father in heaven and we are truly God’s children.

In 1961 when I was a young lad and still in confirmation classes our farm in south central Illinois was hit by ferocious straight winds over 100 mile an hour. I remember our family, my mother and father, my brother and I huddling under a table in the basement of our farm house as the winds tore old sheds from their foundations and trees were ripped from their deep roots. As we huddled we prayed the Lord’s Prayer. Maybe I remembered what I was learning in confirmation class about Luther’s explanation to the introduction to the prayer: “With these words God wants to attract us so that we come to believe that he is truly our Father and we are truly his children…”

In the aftermath of the storms--we got hit two nights in a row--we were faced with a summers work of clean up and rebuilding, nothing of which even begins to compare to what others go through with the loss of home or livelihood or life itself. But I remember the strength required of us that summer and the toll it placed upon my parents. For many in the face of seemingly insurmountable challenges caused by disaster, there is the temptation to despair, to lose all hope. We Christians have the gift of the Good News of God in Jesus Christ and we dare not short-change the power of that gift, that word of hope in the midst of disaster. That is why our prayer and our witness of the Gospel of Jesus Christ is so very important.

And, of course, that is also why we respond with incarnational acts of love – our very presence with a listening ear, a strong back to muck out houses or hands that help to rebuild. And when we cannot be there in person we give money to provide resources that aid people in recovery.

There are many who are good at this work—the people of the Federal Emergency Management Assistance, local police and fire departments with their search and rescue teams, the National Guard, the Red Cross, Salvation Army and many others. It is good that we support their work with our tax dollars and charitable contributions. And let us support the work we Lutherans do!

Lutheran Disaster Response has its own role. LDR is not the first on the scene but as FEMA officials have said, “Lutherans are the last to leave.” In a few weeks the media will leave and stories of disaster recovery will be off our radar. This is when Lutheran Disaster Response moves in. LDR works on a case management model with FEMA, VOAD (Volunteer Organizations Active in Disaster) and many local and diverse organizations. With partners on the ground LDR seeks to reach and help the most vulnerable, the uninsured, the under insured, people of poverty, people with special needs, people who otherwise have not had friends and family who readily come to their assistance.

In the midst of disasters, when hope is shaken, when help is needed, we give thanks for God who is our refuge and strength. And we respond with acts of love as we are able:

**These are the ones we will serve,**

**these are the ones we will love;**

**all these are neighbors to us**

**and you.**

**Jesu, Jesu,**

**fill us with your love,**

**show us how to serve,**

**the neighbors we have from you.**

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