

Did You Practice?

This month is National Tornado awareness and last week was Wisconsin Tornado Drill week. Did you practice? I could throw many statistics and figures as to why it is important, but like the commercial says, “we become nose blind to odor.” We have become a society that is overwhelmed by information. Two weeks ago during a pastoral visit to a local hospital, I encountered the staff preparing for a baby kidnaping drill. It hasn’t been that long that I would have been involved with such a drill as a hospital chaplain. Last week while visiting another hospital, they announced the state tornado drill, and my first thought was the inconvenience it could mean to my meeting. Shame on me. I know better.

Let me tell you a story to put this in perspective. As a young parent living in the foothills of South Carolina, one could not see far into the horizon. As soon as wind or potential tornado weather looked likely I would gather our young girls and ride out the storm in our house hallway, as we had no basement and the bathtub had a window above it. Overkill? No!

One day I prepared a casserole for a church member recovering from an accident. I loaded it, the girls, and my mother who lived around the corner to drive the casserole to the intended family. With my husband out of town, we were going to treat ourselves to a favorite restaurant afterward. The day was warm, no clouds in the sky, and no expected rain in the forecast. The congregation member lived less than three miles from us. As I turned into the cul-de-sac, my mother and I tried to determine the right house. I saw a man standing in the doorway of one house, and then I saw nothing.

The sky turned black, the wind came out of nowhere, and rain was so hard even my wiper blades could not help. “Mom, there was a man there. It is not safe to stay in this car.” She gathered one granddaughter, and I gathered my other daughter, and we ran for the house. He welcomed us in, provided towels for us “drowned rats” and helped us shelter as the storm ran through. It took less than 10 minutes. They were the family my casserole was intended for. Their back yard was a mess, but their house and my car were fine.

Why did we exit our vehicle? Education and practice. Cars are not safe in such storms. We traveled on to the restaurant and ordered our meal, but my gut told me to call my neighbor at home. Both of our husbands were away. As she answered, her first words were “are you and the girls ok? That tree on your roof must have scared you.” We promptly left the restaurant, returning home to find six trees in various states that needed attention. In fact two took out my neighbor’s aboveground pool and sent all that water downhill into another neighbor’s house. Straight line winds, not a tornado, caused all that damage on a day that looked sunny and fine. This is why we practice.

Again I ask, do you practice? I recently attended Red Cross training in Wausau (in fact the week before the mass snow melt which facilitated multiple shelters for those affected by the flood). At each class our instructors introduced themselves, announced where bathrooms could be found, explained the designated safe spots in the building, and the evacuation plan of the building should any disaster strike. Why is this important? You have a group of people possibly unfamiliar with the meeting space, but we also had multiple people with physical impairments that would impede their ability to act should it be required. While we did not practice, we had conversations about what we would do if the need arises.

Now think about this, it is Sunday morning and you are preparing for worship to begin. Maybe you are very familiar with the building, but there are people among you who may be new or others who may need assistance should the unexpected happen. It is not enough to have a sign in your designated safe spot from tornadoes if it has not been discussed in the Sanctuary. That weather radio that should alert people (I have worn out two of them) that sits in the church office might not be heard during service. Are there enough smart phones to alert you of the coming weather disaster? Many of our churches have stained glass windows that block our ability to see the sky.

In Wisconsin we can experience all kinds of weather even in the same day. One of the lasting images from a First Presbyterian youth mission trip in Joplin, Missouri, was the image of a cross still standing months after tornadoes devastated the town. However, the church right behind it had been totally flattened. Imagine what that would have been like had worship been happening when that storm hit.

Disaster preparedness means, we talk, we plan, and we practice so when that day comes, we know exactly what we must do to provide as much safety as possible not only for our families and local community but for our church community as well. So, I ask one more time "Do You Practice?" If that day comes, it just might save your life and those around you.

Blessings
Catherine Neal