

SAUGATUCK POWER AND LIGHT

As you may know, my wife Linda and I have two sons who live with their wives and children in Florida. Needless to say, hurricane season always makes us a bit nervous. So far this year they've not faced any difficulties, but the season is far from over!

Sometimes, of course, hurricanes by-pass Florida altogether. They go to the south, and hit Mexico or Central America, like Hurricanes Dean and Felix this year—or they make landfall to the north and hit the Carolinas.

Such was the case in 2003, four years ago this week, when Hurricane Isabel, at times a Category 5 storm, hit Cape Hatteras in North Carolina. Its winds hit 165 miles and hour, and it dumped many inches of rain. In fact, it was the most costly hurricane of that year, killing thirty-five people, and causing some \$3.6 billion dollars worth of damage.

When it made landfall it completely annihilated the road going inland from the Cape. Like a scene out of *The Wizard of Oz*, houses were lifted up off their foundations, and plunked down far away from their lots. One hotel was moved to the center of the road. Trees, cars, large appliances, outbuildings, were scattered abroad.

But, in the midst of the confusion and chaos, in the wake of death and destruction, in the middle of that long dark time, one structure survived the storm, one structure remained. Casting its ray of hope, its beam of light, the Cape Hatteras Lighthouse, that famous black and white striped beacon, stood firm.

Many scientists believe hurricanes will grow more numerous and more severe in this time of global warming, and remind us we need to be very concerned, and so we are. But there are other troubling storms in our lives as well. Wall Street is in turmoil. The war in Iraq still drags on. While the poverty rate declined slightly last year, there are even more folks without health insurance, well over 48 million. And the list goes on—big issues and small ones. Global concerns and local ones like the battle over the Y. And very personal struggles: aging parents, rebelling teens, divorce, illness—at times its enough to make a person throw up his or her hands in utter despair.

It is then that we need the bright beam of a lighthouse—and the reassuring sound of the foghorn reminding us that we are not alone. Urging us to stand firm, to shine on.

Lighthouses, of course, are never built behind a mountain—but rather out in front. Their huge lamps are not shuttered, rather they are covered with wide clear windows, so that their light can spill out across the turbulent waves to guide the way, to offer hope, to bring light into the darkness. To build a lighthouse, to wire up its halogen lamps, and then to cover it up, would be ludicrous.

It's this very idea that Jesus is trying to convey in our reading from Mathew. It is part of a string of teachings known as the Sermon on the Mount.

Jesus' listeners were not a seafaring people—stories of lighthouses wouldn't have been very helpful. But they knew about darkness, better perhaps than we do. Scholar William Barclay describes their homes: “[Their] houses were very dark,” he writes, “with only one circular window, not more than eighteen inches across.” (*Daily Study Bible, Matthew 1: 142*) All they had to light their dark homes were lamps shaped like a gravy boat, with a wick floating in the oil. This small oil lamp was placed on a stand, often the highest point in the room, so that it might shed light throughout the house.

These lamps were carefully guarded, for in a time before matches, if it went out at night, relighting it was a major chore. In fact, it was even left burning when the family left the house. It was taken down from the stand, and then covered by a pottery bushel sized measuring cup, to keep it from setting anything on fire.

Nobody would light a lamp, put it on a stand and then cover it! No, a lit lamp on a stand was lit for light! “No one,” says Jesus, “after lighting a lamp puts it under a bushel basket, but on a lamp stand, and it gives light to all in the house.” (Matthew 5:15)

Now, listen, sisters and brothers, all this talk about lighthouses and lamps is not just idle chatter, but rather, if you'll pardon the pun, it's designed to illuminate a point. And that point? The same one Jesus makes. For you see, Jesus calls us to be a light to the world. You and me as individuals, and you and me as a congregation.

Saugatuck Congregational Church, is called to be a lighthouse, a lamp on a stand, a beacon of hope in a world often cloaked in darkness.

But preacher, you may ask, how can I be a light to the world when my wick is wet? How can I be a light to the world when my batteries need recharging? How can I be a light to the world when I can't even see my own way clearly?

Well, sisters and brothers, there's good news. You're not expected to be an Eveready Bunny. This congregation isn't called to be a self-generating power supply. For just as a lighthouse relies on batteries and external sources and other external sources of power, just as a lamp

needs oil, so we too can, and must, rely on a source of power greater than our own. And that source, that fount of power, is the Holy One who created light itself! And unlike CL & P, unlike United Illuminating, Saugatuck Power and Light has a never ending supply of power! For the power from God that flows into our life as a congregation is only limited by our willingness to throw open the switches! And that light, that God given light, is just what the world needs!

This past week, for the first time in a long time, our sanctuary windows were cleaned inside and out. It's a hard job, with special challenges presented by their age and construction. But now the sunlight can shine through more brightly. Which is all well and good.

But windows work two ways. And as nice as it is to have sunlight shining in, our real task is to shine out! Our real task is to be a lamp on a stand, a lighthouse in a storm.

Think about it. We have so much that God has granted us. So much light to share.

We have this venerable old building. It has borne witness like a lighthouse for 175 years. It's been a place where young and old could find comfort and help and guidance, for lo these many decades. And now parts of it are a bit worn, parts of it are in need of modernizing. Parts of it need to be polished up like windows, so that the light can shine more brightly for the children of our church school, for the elderly and disabled who need full access, for the 2500 community folks who use our facility every week as we reach out in mission. That's why we are proposing a capital campaign and renovation project. Let it shine, brothers and sisters, let it shine!

Our educational programs for children and adults are among the finest in town. We make known the good news that God calls us to be not only a people of deep faith, but also a people of intellect. Here a child learns to serve others. Here a high school student becomes a leader. Here adults learn about the Bible, about caring for the earth about prayers that heal, about church history, ethical issues and so much more. Sisters and brothers, it's time to let others know! It's time to share the light!

We reach out to those in need in so many ways. We collect hundreds of bags of food for the hungry, we prepare dozens and dozens of meals for the homeless, we offer up our holiday feasts, we give thousands of dollars to agencies doing good in the world. Mission is happening at Saugatuck. Let it shine!

We worship together at least three times a week. We are blessed by a variety of worship styles ranging from superb traditional services, rooted in classical music and hymns, to uplifting jazz and contemporary programs. We have Taize, with its peaceful chant, and

Serenity for twelve-steppers and so much more. We have four gifted choirs, led by three extraordinary musicians. And it's time to shine, my friends, it's time to shine!

Most importantly, indeed key to all the rest, we are a community of Christ. We are a people who are seeking to follow the way of Jesus, seeking to embody the Light of Christ. We don't always do it right. We make mistakes. At times we fail to live up to God's standards. But we live in covenant and we know the wonder of forgiveness. We know that love is unlimited. And we know it's not just for a select few, but rather for all. That's good news, church, that's incredibly good news!

You may have seen that the Penfield Lighthouse in Fairfield is for sale. The town is considering buying it from the feds, so are others. It's available for just \$1, and a string of promises and commitments to maintain it.

But you and I don't need to buy a lighthouse. We've got one right here—one granted us by the grace of God and the good stewardship of our forbears. And this lighthouse, the building, the people, the spirit, is powered by the very Light of the World.

Our task, sisters and brothers, is to let it shine. Our task is to throw open the switches, to trim the wicks, to polish the windows. Our task is to let the light shine so brightly in and through us that the world will know there is a God who loves all people, who forgives us, who is with us in good times and bad, on sunny days, and those filled with wind and rain. Saugatuck Power and Light is open for business! So let it shine, sisters and brothers, let it shine!

Amen

John H. Danner