



The Rains Came up and the Floods Came Down.

It is said, “Into every life, a little rain must fall.” On December 17, 1999, the people of Venezuela wished they had never heard of that proverb, or imagined what it might mean. On that single, horrifying day, tens of thousands of people died, or were left missing or homeless from days of torrential rain, floods and mudslides near the city of Caracas. The figures illustrate the scope of a tragedy Venezuelan officials have called the nation’s worst disaster in half a century. The downpour triggered avalanches of mud, rocks and boulders on Mount Avila, outside Caracas. Thousands of flimsy, precariously perched shacks surrounding the city were swept away. Millions of poor people had built homes on the mountainside because they couldn’t afford to live anywhere else. For decades, government officials did little to stop them. And when the rains came, they were swept away. “There are approximately 150,000 people homeless, 7,000 persons are missing and about 2000 dead,” said Foreign Minister Jose Rangel, quoting figures for Caracas and seven other states, including the tourist island of Margarita. At least, those were the figures given. But in the weeks to come, the figures rose much higher, and many more than 2000 died. The rain, too, continued to fall...In fact nine northern states and Caracas were declared disaster areas. “[My neighbourhood] is now a sea of mud, there are no houses left, nothing,” said one man. The torrential rains were blamed on *La Nina*, a meteorological phenomenon that has brought unusually rainy and cool weather to South America this year.

I used to love the rain as a child, from an indoor point of view, that is. Rain makes a very beautiful sound as it falls on asphalt shingles, especially at night, or early in the morning, when all is quiet and you are in bed, deep under cover, listening to the silent sounds of the world at rest—the fridge, the furnace, a clock ticking, the rush of a passing car, voices in the street. With some exceptions, including the vicious hailstorm we experienced on Thursday morning, rain almost always starts slowly, which is why it is so much fun to listen for. Tap.....tap.....tap, tap tap, tap, tap-tap-tap-tap...I remember hearing that a hundred times. Sometimes, however, rain comes on suddenly, and so ferociously, that the noise of its falling becomes so intense that you can’t hear anything else.

Just out of interest, the following are the world extremes in rainfall. You will find them unimaginable: *Greatest amount in one year*: 1,042 inches, at Cherrapungi, India, which is 4,000 feet above sea level, from August 1860 to July 1861. *Greatest amount in one month*: 366 inches, again at Cherrapunji. *Greatest amount in one day*: 73.6 inches at Cilaos on Reunion Island, off the east coast of Madagascar, on March 16, 1952. *Greatest amount in one hour*: 12.0 inches, at Holt Missouri, on June 22, 1907. *Greatest amount in five minutes*: 2.48 inches, at Portobelillo, in Panama, on November 29, 1911. *Greatest*

amount in one minute: 1.23 inches at Unionville, Maryland, on July 4, 1956 (there is no indication whether or not the rain put an end to the Fourth of July parade)....

When the ancients listened to rain, they thought they heard life itself. For without rain, no crops grew. In Palestine, the first appreciable rains have always come in late October early November; and the last, falling now, in the first half of April. The Bible calls these the early rains and the latter rains. The early rains are critical, and prepare the soil for ploughing and seeding. The latter rains, though not critical, help to mature the grain and guarantee a bumper crop. *The more the rain, the better the grain....*In return for faithful covenant-keeping, God made the following promise to Israel: "I will give the rain for your land in its season, the early and the latter rain, that you may gather in your grain and your wine and your oil."

Jesus refers to rain only twice in the Gospels: "God causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good," he said, in the Sermon on the Mount, "and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous." The other reference is in the parable we read this morning, about the wise, and foolish, builders, in which he compares the building of buildings to the building of lives. And he compares the rain to the inevitable assaults of time and circumstance, not to mention the vagaries of humanity itself. We read the Lukan version; this is how the parable reads in Matthew: "Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rains came down, and the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash."

Into every life a little rain must fall, and indeed does fall; rain that starts in the early morning of each life. Drop, by drop, by drop, drop, the rain falls, on the just and the unjust, slowly, imperceptibly, like the firstlings of a storm. A habit, a disposition, an attitude, an experience, a relationship, a decision....These tiny drops of rain, as it were, begin to collect, in the lives of people, year after year after year...And soon pools of water begin to form, and streams rise. No building is constructed overnight, nor does a person become a person, but that the moments, hours, days, and weeks, give way to years, and a unique individual of distinctive character is formed.

For many of us, it is not until a person's life is over that we begin to understand what gave rise to it: that is, the immensely complex forces that act upon human beings, to make them who they are. Some are at work before people are born; others at work in infancy, early childhood, and beyond; some manifest only in adolescence, as every parent will tell you, but the time a person becomes a man or a woman, there is a tale in the telling. How do people get into such trouble? How is it some people become so successful, whatever that means, so healthy, so connected, so productive, and others so deformed and so desolate? *Who is responsible??* How is it that some people who hang out at church bring light everywhere they go, whereas others bring doom and darkness, desperately undermining everything they possibly can with endless self-serving denunciations about

this, that, and everyone else, as if they alone are guardians of truth, justice, and in this case the Presbyterian way? You, me, God, Fate, Chance, Inevitability, Circumstance? To be sure, I am not about to answer that question in the next five minutes. Whatever the case, things creep into one's life very slowly.... Like the falling rain... An unhappy family of origin, a bitter experience, (or two, or three....) a broken or inappropriate relationship—(or two, or three....) Habits *unconsciously begun* become attitudes become disposition become character become destiny. And before you know it, the water is rising, all around and the houses men and women build for their souls to live are suddenly threatened with destruction.

But I have good news. Into this fracas—this “tale told by an idiot,” as Shakespeare put it in *Macbeth*, “full of sound and fury, signifying nothing,” comes the voice of the Lord Jesus. And with it an extraordinary promise. Whoever hears the words of Jesus, and puts them into practice, is like a house built upon a rock. The rains will come, and beat upon it. And yet that house will stand. Experiences and relationships will come and go; decisions will be taken; jobs worked, children fathered and mothered, goodbyes said. *But the house will stand.*

Whoever hears the words of Jesus, however, but does not put them into practice, is like a house built upon sand. The rains will come, and beat upon it. Experiences, relationships decisions, jobs, hellos and goodbyes: and the house will fall, in Jesus' words, “with a great crash.” The great and obvious therefore in this tragic parable, is, of course, hear the words of Jesus. And not only that, put them into practice.

It's easy enough to hear the words of Jesus; we read them here, in this place, every week. But to put them into practice, that is another matter. It's hard work. It's moment-by-moment, hour-by-hour day-by-day, year-by-year work. But in time, the results show.

For all of you own houses, to whose sainted ranks I have only late been joined—I think, sometimes, to my eternal regret—you will understand that house maintenance is no easy thing. Last summer I took a short trip up to Cathedral Lakes, three days only.... And while I was away, a soft-bodied water filter under my sink sprang a pinprick hole. By the time I returned, the cupboard underneath my sink was flooded. I cleaned it up, of course, and put a warm light bulb into the cabinet to try and dry up the warped and waterlogged wood. But in the days and weeks to come I noticed a strange thing happening to my kitchen floor. It began to bubble up in different places, in fact, three or four feet from the cupboard itself!! For the longest time I couldn't figure out what was happening underneath the linoleum. But then I realized just how much damage water could do. Here I had just bought a house, albeit an older one, and strange things were already afoot!! To date I still haven't fixed the problem, because it will not be an easy fix—such damage never is! I will have to tear up the whole floor, and replace the sub-flooring with proper plywood, and not the particle board which is already there....plus replace the cupboard itself...which will probably mean replacing all of the other cupboards, too, which certainly need it...etc. etc. etc....groan!!! I am not looking forward to it, but it is time to put my new floor, and new cupboards into practice, so that the house in which I live will be fit to sustain life.

Let us then hear Jesus' words, and hearing, practice. The rain is coming, but we will stand. Amen.

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