

**Fair warning**  
Ezekiel 33:1-11  
September 4, 2005

This morning I awoke in a comfortable bed in a comfortably air-conditioned home.

I am one of the fortunate ones.

This morning I chose what I wanted for breakfast from a well-stocked refrigerator and pantry, just enough to hold me over 'til Sunday dinner.

I am one of the fortunate ones.

This morning I enjoyed a hot shower and the undeniable benefits of indoor plumbing.

I am one of the fortunate ones.

This morning I left a house filled with treasures: books and photographs, fishing gear and scrapbooks, kayaks and bicycles, televisions and stereo systems.

I am one of the fortunate ones.

This morning I know where the members of my family are, and I know that they are alive and well.

I am one of the fortunate ones.

Just 873 miles from here, there are children and women and men who are not so fortunate. They awoke this morning -- if they slept at all -- to stifling heat, to cramped and unsanitary living conditions, to a day of uncertain hopes and certain fears. This morning they have no food, no water, no access to bathroom facilities or medical care. This morning they have no home, no possessions, no job, nothing. This morning they don't know where members of their families are, or whether they are alive and well.

But I am one of the fortunate ones. You are one of the fortunate ones. We are 873 miles away. We read, we watch, we listen to the stories of the devastation inflicted by Katrina on the cities and people of New Orleans and Gulfport and Biloxi. We are overwhelmed by the images of their suffering. We empathize with their feelings of grief and helplessness. We even try to imagine ourselves in their places, try to comprehend what it would be like to lose everything and to face a daunting battle just to stay alive one more day.

But we are not in their places. It is not us. And we whisper prayers of thanks that it is not us!

But it is ... It is us.

We do feel the effects of this storm, and not just at the gas pump. We share the economic fallout. We share the political repercussions. We share the social disruptions. And we share the blame. The blame? Yes, the blame! We failed to give fair warning.

We failed to give fair warning! Yes, we told them the storm was coming. They were warned. They were urged to evacuate. That was the thing that baffled me at first. How could people die? Why didn't they leave? In this age of satellite imagery and instant communication, you would think people would know enough to get out in time. They were warned!

But some people simply couldn't get out. Jim Wallis, founder and editor of *Sojourners* magazine, observes that during natural disasters, *Those who have the least to lose are often those who lose the most ...*

*It is much harder for the poor to evacuate. They don't own cars, can't afford to rent them, and often can't even afford a tank of gas ... They can't afford an airplane, train, or even a bus ticket. And, as one low-income person told a New Orleans reporter, they have no place to go. People in poverty can't afford motel or hotel rooms, and often don't have friends or family in other places with space to spare. In New Orleans, there were many people who desperately wanted to leave but couldn't ...*

Yes, they were warned, but it was not a fair warning. It came too late. We failed to give fair warning about the conditions and decisions and systemic injustices -- things over which we do have control -- that exacerbated the damages done by this great storm.

We did not give fair warning about the potentially devastating side effects of draining wetlands for residential and commercial development. And when those lands were needed to absorb the excess water, they were not there.

We did not give fair warning about the risks of diverting funds away from flood management and contingency planning to finance a speculative war in Iraq. We did not give fair warning about the risks of diverting National Guard personnel and equipment to that same war. And when the soldiers and equipment were needed to respond to people in crisis, they were not there.

We did not give fair warning about global warming. To be fair, the cause and effect between global warming and the recent increase in the intensity and frequency of major storms has not been firmly established. But to be fair, the connection is plausible enough, and when something has the potential to cause the kind of general havoc global warming can certainly cause and is causing, you do something about it! You don't just say it needs more study while you protect the economic interests of polluters!

We did not give fair warning about the vulnerability of the lower classes, about the growing gulf between rich and poor in America, about the real dangers poverty poses on a daily basis to an alarming percentage of this wealthy nation's citizens. Twenty-eight percent of the inhabitants of New Orleans live below the poverty line and they are paying the price of this "natural" disaster! Katrina has exposed the fault lines in American society and has made clear who is cared for and who is ignored.

And that is our problem. Because it is our job to give fair warning. We are lookouts! Let me paraphrase Ezekiel ...

*I am making you a lookout for the nation. You must pass on the warnings I give you. If you do not warn people to change their ways so that lives can be saved, I will hold you responsible for their deaths.*

We do not bear responsibility for the choices other people make, but we do bear responsibility for warning them of the consequences of their choices.

And I am talking about a threat much bigger and much more devastating than a hurricane. In no way do I want to trivialize the immensity of the suffering of folks afflicted by this storm. But you know as well as I that there are countless children and women and men -- in Darfur, in Niger, in India, in Haiti -- who face the same conditions and worse, not for three days or three weeks or three years, but every day of their foreshortened lives. And there are countless children and women and men -- in Paris, in London, in Beijing, in Waterloo -- who face an equally menacing but largely invisible threat to their well-being, the threat of aimlessness, despair, moral bankruptcy, spiritual emptiness.

Sin is the disease that infects all of humanity and this disease is always fatal! Sin works death into our spirits and into our bodies. Sin makes us careless -- care-less -- about our own selves, and careless -- care-less -- about other selves. Selfishness and greed and envy and pride pollute our souls and rend the fabric of human community. Sin in its many forms is at the root of all human conflict and almost all human suffering. Sin is a disease that is always fatal. But there is a cure ... and we know what it is!

Christianity is a salvation religion.

It's not a self-help, advice-for-better-living religion.

It's not a religion for preserving moral order and social stability.

It's not an escapist religion, getting us by with dreams of a better place.

It's a salvation religion, pure and simple. We are afflicted with a disease that will kill us, but we put our faith in a God who will save us and who is saving us from death and giving us life. That is the good news and that is what we are charged with telling.

If we are silent ... If we are silent, then we bear responsibility for all those who suffer sin's effects -- the effects of their own sins, or the effects others' sins against them, or the dehumanizing effects of the sins of human institutions. It's our job to be lookouts, to give fair warning, to name sin as what it is -- a clear and present danger. We do not speak to condemn, because the very same deadly disease is at work in every one of us -- in every body, in every spirit. We speak not to judge, not to condemn, but to warn. *Why do you want to die?*

The reports from Louisiana and Mississippi are heartbreaking, almost more than we can bear. Because the suffering is so palpable. Because the hardships are so extreme. Because it is all happening too close to home. Because this storm exposed the deep flaws in our American social fabric. We feel overwhelmed. We feel helpless. We are horrified. We even feel guilty, guilty for what we do have, guilty for the comforts we still enjoy while they have lost every thing and every comfort.

I can understand the guilt because I have felt it too, a kind of survivors' guilt. But God does not ask us to feel guilty. What we have we have as God's gift, so give thanks ... always. Never despise God's goodness. Just put your good fortune to good use. Empathize and act. Pray and give.

And don't forget what God does ask you to do. God asks you to be a lookout. God asks you to give fair warning. So give fair warning! Do not be silent! Do not stand idly by while the forces of sin and death are having their way with humanity!

Be the voice crying on the wilderness! Be the prophet who boldly speaks the truth! Be the whistle blower who cannot look the other way! Be the fly in the ointment! Be the pain in the neck! Be the mouth that will not shut up! Be the irrepressible voice of shalom! Be the lookout God tells you to be! Give fair warning!