

I will tell you a little of our history. Pastor Bultman and I have been here ministering at Bethel for 14 years. We have a small, loving congregation (about 100 average attendance on Sunday). Our congregation ministers to many military families, which come and go from Keesler Air Force Base (which is home to the "Hurricane Hunters"). We have very few life-long Lutherans (people born into the Lutheran Church). Many of our members are new Christians and we have more adult baptisms than we do infant baptisms. We have baptized entire families in our church-- families who were previously unchurched. This is a real "mission field", where most people don't even know how to spell Lutheran, and they certainly don't know what we believe as Lutherans.

What we are is a Family of God, a family for those who are away from their biological families. People who visit us notice immediately our loving, caring people and how welcoming they are to all people. Even the volunteers that are coming into our church and staying here notice the warmth and love that abounds here.

Our members built our beautiful new church with our own hands and God's help. It was dedicated on Easter Sunday two years ago. We worked nights and weekends (all of us including our children and youth), putting up the studs, hanging sheet rock, finishing sheet rock, painting, laying floor tile, hanging ceiling tile, etc. We learned a lot about construction during those two years, and we grew in our faith and love for one another. (The only part we didn't build was the Sanctuary, which has very steep ceilings).

When Hurricane Katrina hit, it not only devastated our cities and towns. It devastated our churches and schools. As for Bethel, our members have been hit hard and many have completely lost their homes. The homes that are still standing have had five feet or more of water and have to either be cleaned or they will be condemned. The schools have all been closed and still are. Our people have lost their homes, their jobs, their schools and their entire life has been turned upside down. The first Sunday after the storm we had 20 of our regular members in attendance (3 children). My daughter said it best. When she called me before I returned from evacuation, she said, "Mama, there are no words to describe this!" And, ...she was right.

I visited our daughter's church in Atlanta on the Sunday after the storm. During the sermon, Pastor Terry Stagner Collier asked the question, "Where is God in all this?" She answered that question saying that "God is in the pain, He is in the suffering, He is in our loss. But, most of all, God is in our ACTION, our response to His call! He calls us to act. Last night during our nightly celebration and devotions with our volunteers, Pastor Quall, from Virginia (who was volunteering with us) answered this question again for me. He used the beautiful sermon on the mount, we heard those beautiful Beatitudes one more time, but this time a little differently. Blessed are those that mourn, Blessed are those who are merciful, Blessed are the poor in heart, Blessed are the persecuted, Blessed are those workers in God's kingdom *for they shall see God!* Yes, God is here in our pain, our suffering, and our mourning...in all this sorrow, "We shall see God!" And, we are.

Peace,  
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