

Here I Am



**Brethren Disaster Ministries
Devotional Guide**

Frank Ramirez

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Brethren Disaster Ministries Mission Statement

Brethren Disaster Ministries, a program of the Church of the Brethren General Board, is committed to and actively involved in Christ's mission of service and reconciliation, by offering assistance, both human and material, to suffering children, women and men, and groups displaced by persecution, armed conflict, and major disaster, both natural and human-induced. This unit includes home rebuilding and repair, children's disaster services, and refugee resettlement.



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Resources

Go with Abram, Go with Sarai.

Sing to the tune of AR HYD Y NOS (*Go My Children* - #433)

*Go with Abram, go with Sarai. God knows the way.
Though our comfort, though inertia begs us to stay,
Only on this journey striving
Will we be God's folks, believing.
Go with faith for God is drawing out the new day.*

*God is blessing all the people, both near and far.
Just as wise ones saw and followed that distant star.
In like fashion are God's people
Called away from church and steeple,
Sharing hope and living peace where people are.*

Are Ye Able?

*"Are ye able," said the Master, "to be crucified with me?"
"Yea," the sturdy dreamers answered, "to the death we follow thee."*

Refrain:

*"Lord, we are able. Our spirits are thine.
Remold them, make us, like thee, divine.
Thy guiding radiance above us shall be a beacon to God, to love and loyalty."*

*"Are ye able to remember when a thief lifts up his eyes,
That his pardoned soul is worthy of a place in paradise?"
(Refrain)*

*"Are ye able?" still the Master whispers down eternity,
And heroic spirits answer, now, as then, in Galilee
(Refrain)*



The Church of the Brethren holds to the firm conviction that our work is a vital component of our faith. We adhere to the Biblical expression that faith and works go hand in hand.

HERE I AM is a fine resource for your personal or group meditation and worship. The challenging title well defines the nature of the content. It speaks directly to many of the feelings volunteers experience.

This devotional was written by Frank Ramirez, who has graciously granted us the privilege of sharing it with you.

In case you are asked to lead a daily devotional service, this resource could be a most helpful tool.

May God bless you as you live out your calling by serving as a disaster response or disaster child care volunteer.

In Christ,

Brethren Disaster Ministries Staff

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Here I Am
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Are you there, really there, where you are working?
Or are you focusing on where you will be in a few days' time?
How important is it for you to be fully present?

Day 11 Evening: *For a Limited Time Only*

Read: Genesis 14:18-20

You are a priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek. (Hebrews 5:6)

As part of a Faith Expedition sponsored by the Church of the Brethren, Jennie and I traveled to Guatemala. Previously, in partnership with Guatemalans, the church had helped to purchase cisterns and stoves. During our trip, we were able to see for ourselves how these items were changing lives. Our driver, a native Guatemalan, was surprised that we avoided the tourist traps and, instead, desired to stay among the poor.

The highlight of the trip was riding the van as far as it would go, taking a truck as far as it would go, and then walking until we came to the home of a special family. The couple, who had both lost spouses in the course of the conflict, were survivors of a Civil War that had lasted three and a half decades. Their children clustered around them.

The highlight of our time with this family (if you don't count the ants that visited our sleeping bags at night) was a meal of black beans, rice, and corn tortillas. Shared in a cramped, smoke-stained kitchen, they had made the dinner special by slicing in a few carrots.

A few remarks seemed in order. So, through the translator (since my Spanish is rudimentary), I called to mind the story of Melchizedek. Both king and priest, Melchizedek comes out of nowhere to honor Abraham and in turn receives honor as well. Though the encounter is brief (recounted in only a few verses), yet the impact is lasting - reverberating through the centuries in Jewish theology and thought, as well as prefiguring the perfect king and priest named Jesus.

I shared with our hosts that, in the same way, though we were spending less than twenty-four hours with them, it was clear that the experience would remain for a lifetime. Real life is like that. A brief encounter can make a lasting impression, sharpening the desire for ministry and service to the world in the name of Jesus – and prefigure the common meal we will all share at the heavenly banquet table.

Consider Mark 14:32: *They went to a place called Gethsemane; and he said to his disciples, 'Sit here while I pray.'* I suggest that you also sit and wait for God to speak to you.

Sing: "Were you there" - #257

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What child has especially touched your heart?
What (and how) will you tell children back home about your experiences?

Foreword

Here I Am:

Seventeen Days of Meditations for Disaster Relief Volunteers

This devotional guide was written at the request of my spouse, Jennie Ramirez, who has gone out as a volunteer for both Children's Disaster Services (formerly known as Disaster Child Care) and the old-fashioned hammer-and-nail disaster relief work. Jennie thought it would be a good thing to provide volunteers with a meditation booklet to provide a little food for thought as well as Bible study while working for the Lord.

I am delighted to create this devotional booklet. I love writing short meditations, and write about 60 or 70 a year. (A little truth in advertising – some of these are original and others are adapted from the meditations I produce for “Out of Context,” [part of each lesson in the Church of the Brethren edition of *International Studies*], *Rejoice!* and *The Upper Room*.)

This devotional guide is designed to cover 17 days. Day 1 is the day before leaving for the disaster site. Days 2 and 16 are travel days. Day 17 is the day “after” - after unpacking and getting back into a normal routine. (I'm assuming that most folks are heading off for a two-week stint, but sometimes that includes three weekends, or gets extended a day or two, so I'm including an odd day or two.)

Included for each day are a morning and an evening meditation. (My hope is that the morning meditation will provide something to think about throughout the day.) For both

Day 11 Morning: *Protect the Children*

Read: Jeremiah 31:15-17

The tongue of the infant sticks to the roof of its mouth for thirst; the children beg for food, but no one gives them anything.
(Lamentations 4:4 NRSV)

While doing research on missions, I discovered a note about a woman named Evelyn Trostle, a professor at McPherson College. In 1920, seeking a new way of life after her mother passed away, Evelyn was sent to help victims of genocide in Armenia in 1920.

The report simply read that Trostle "...witnessed some of the terrible massacres," adding that, "She preferred to remain by her post of duty, trusting God for protection, rather than to desert her orphans...."

Fascinated, I spent months trying to learn more about her. Finally, what I found confirmed my initial guess – that here was a hero who put herself in harm's way to protect vulnerable children during a massacre. (Read more about her in my book *The Meanest Man in Patrick County*, Brethren Press, 2004.)

Over the decades, one horrific war has followed another. Inevitably, worldwide, innocent children have suffered and died. Yet God inspires individuals such as Evelyn Trostle to save the children. Whether it has meant hiding, smuggling, doctoring, teaching, feeding, adopting, sponsoring or whisking them around the globe; advocating, lobbying, legislating or writing about them; or physically standing between them and harm's way - God's people remain at the ready, often at great personal risk and cost, to protect the children of the world from unreasoning violence.

The story of God's people in today's scripture passage takes place against a backdrop of violence, with children the innocent victims then as now. But God gives us hope that through our prayers and actions the wailing of mothers will give way to shouts of gladness.

Children come first. Children always come first.

Sing: "Children of the heavenly Father" - #616

Pray: *Father, we commend the children of the world into your care and recognize your challenge to us: to join you in preserving these precious lives. Amen.*

Questions for reflection, journaling, or discussion:

times, I've included a suggested Bible passage to read, a printed key verse,* a prayer, a suggested hymn** and occasionally a litany.

Most days the whole group can use these meditations during breakfast or the late night snack. In addition I've included a question or two for personal reflection, journaling, or group discussion around the table for the folks who are eating together. (Relax! This is not a test and no one will check your answers.)

I don't know what your circumstances will be at the disaster site. Maybe you'll be sleeping on the floor, or on a cot, or in a hotel. Maybe you are driving yourself or planning to fly halfway across the country.

No matter what, when you arrive, you'll be out of your comfort zone, a stranger in a strange land. And, whether you feel up to it or not, you'll be the face of Jesus for people who are suffering. At the same time, if we're to take Matthew 25 seriously, they will present Jesus to you as well. Keep that thought in mind throughout your sojourn.

This devotional booklet is dedicated to all of you who answer the call in the name of Jesus to help those in need following disasters. You're my heroes. Thanks for bringing hope through your presence to those far away and your church family as well. Remember, it's hard to feel worthy when you're in the presence of angels, but it's twice as hard to say no in the face of such suffering . . . and in the courtyard of the Lord.

Frank Ramirez

* All Scripture quotations are from the *New Revised Standard Version*

** Hymn selections are from *Hymnal: A Worship Book*

Day 1 – The day before departure Morning: *Nagging Doubts*

Read: Isaiah 6:1-8

Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" And I said, "Here am I; send me!" (Isaiah 6:8)

Suitcases packed? I know when I'm getting ready for a trip I open and close the suitcases over and over again, certain I'm forgetting something. Worse still, I keep grabbing magazines and books, and throwing them in - even though I'm certain there won't be that much time available for reading, and I'll likely be too tired anyway. So most of the books get tossed back out.

In the midst of your suitcases and traveling bags, to-do lists, instructions for what must be done by others while you're gone, a strange little creature may be lurking -known as a Nagging Doubt.

No one knows exactly what a Nagging Doubt looks like, and it can be especially hard to focus on, since it tends to hover just out of sight. But we all know one when we hear one because a Nagging Doubt tends to chatter all the time to the point where it gets hard to think.

Do you have a Nagging Doubt? Are you wondering why you were chosen, if your training has been adequate, or simply if you will be up to the task that stretches ahead? Perhaps you've been looking forward to your assignment as long as it lay in the distant future, or perhaps you've had doubts from the beginning. No matter. The time has come. It's not convenient, I'm sure, but it's here.

Just remember there is never a perfect time to volunteer to help folks in need, nor will we ever be perfectly trained for what lies ahead. When Isaiah looked into the heavenly court, a king had died and the whole nation of Israel was thrown into turmoil. No one knew what lay in the future. It was the worst possible time to commit to mission and ministry. Yet Isaiah blurted out, "Here I am, send me!"

Here you are! God is sending you.

Can you feel it? You're turning the corner! (Possibly, you have less time ahead of you on this journey than behind.)

Day 10 Evening: *A Ray of Hope*

Read: 2 Chronicles 36

Thus says King Cyrus of Persia: The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Whoever is among you of all his people, may the LORD his God be with him! Let him go up. (2 Chronicles 36:23)

When we visited our friends Mark and Susan Detwiler in Wilmington, Delaware, we worshipped at the synagogue Susan attends. Out of curiosity, I picked up the Jewish Publication Society translation pew bible that rested next to the hymnal.

2 Chronicles 36:23 quoted above is the last verse recorded in the last book. That's because the Hebrew bible (the Christian Old Testament) is arranged in three sections: the Law (the first five books of the Old Testament); the Prophets (Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the 12 prophets); and the Writings (just about everything else).

Is the placement of this verse in Hebrew scripture significant? Probably not. But it is a reminder that the Word comes from God. Such things as chapters, numbered verses, the order of the books, and the significance we give to first and last things have more to do with human choice.

Still, for an ending verse, it is hopeful and inspiring – much more so than Malachi's sober closing to our Old Testament.

Reading 2 Chronicles 36, one observes that the world at that time is falling apart - the temple is destroyed, the land is laid waste, the leadership is deported – prompting the conclusion, *It's all over*. Yet, in the midst of disaster a light appears at the end of the tunnel. God Himself waits there with the rest of the story, a hopeful declaration.

Just as God is present with you now in the midst of another story of disaster. *Hope*. It springs eternal.

Sing: “Beyond a dying sun” - #323

Pray the prayer of St. Francis: *Lord, make me an instrument of your peace. (Hymnal reading #733)*

Questions for reflection, journaling, or discussion:

Are you an agent of hope?

Are you doing more by your words, your actions, or your presence?

Observation:

Sing: “Here I am, Lord” – #395

Pray: *God of grace and God of glory, here I am. Send me! Amen.*

Questions for reflection, journaling, or discussion:

How did you come to accept the call to mission and ministry?

How do you feel about that call?

Day 1 – The day before departure **Evening: *Fashion Report***

Read: Isaiah 6:1-8

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple.
Isaiah 6:1)

Can it really be? Isaiah is in the presence of the Creator of the universe – the One who strung all those stars in the sky, numbered the hairs on our heads, painted all the birds those many beautiful colors, presides over angels ascending and descending, and makes smoke arise - yet all he brings back is a fashion report!? *The hem of God's robe filled the temple . . .* That's it?

Rather than criticize Isaiah, it might be better to ask ourselves how we describe the people around us. Each one is made in the image of God. Each one gives us insight into God's way of thinking, acting, and loving. Yet so often we condense our impressions of each precious human being into a report of clothing, hair style, shoes.

Every human we encounter provides a chance to encounter the mystery of the eternal. During the next two weeks you will be encountering people in crisis, folks who are suffering, and fellow workers who are trying to make a difference. How about taking a real good look? You are about to be given a real gift: The opportunity to enter into the heavenly court and see God in the faces of your sisters and brothers.

Look! See! Remember!

Sing: "Let all mortal flesh keep silence" - #463

Pray: *Open my eyes, God of Vision, that I might see with your eyes. Amen.*

Questions for reflection, journaling, or discussion:

What do I expect to do these next several days?

What do I expect to see?

What is annoying you?
In what ways do you need forgiveness?

Day 10 Morning: *Kinfolk*

Read: Obadiah

*For his anger is but for a moment; his favor is for a lifetime.
Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning.* (Psalm 30:5)

Having grown up in a family of eight children, I know that sometimes it's hard for siblings to get along, if for no other reason than living in close proximity. We learn each other's weaknesses. I laugh now as I recall my father admonishing us, in the midst of an argument, *Don't treat each other like brothers and sisters. Treat each other like friends.*

In verse 11, Obadiah recalls that on the day of Judea's destruction the Edomites acted like foreigners and strangers rather than relatives. The day will come, he adds, *when those who have been saved shall go up to Mount Zion to rule Mount Esau; and the kingdom shall be the Lord's* (vs. 21).

Of course, it didn't have to be this way. God challenged these people to get along. The legal code of the Torah included these words: *You shall not abhor any of the Edomites, for they are your kin. . . . The children of the third generation that are born to them may be admitted to the assembly of the LORD.* (Deuteronomy 23:7-8)

But the chastisement is strictly temporary. One element of God's character is a wrath/mercy dichotomy. *For his anger is but for a moment; his favor is for a lifetime. Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning* (Psalm 30:5). As is usually the case with prophetic utterance, there is a gleam of hope.

The prophecy of Obadiah looks ahead to when God will balance the scales, restore the fortunes of the people, and settle accounts with those who mistreated them. That thought prompts me to note an important truth regarding justice and revenge: *It's a divine prerogative.*

When it comes to addressing and correcting injustices, God has put into our hands the tools of mercy and reconciliation. In the beatitudes, Jesus promises blessings to the children of God who are peacemakers, who are merciful, who hunger and thirst for righteousness. Jesus does not promise blessings to those who wield the sword of vengeance on God's foes.

Sing: "I know not why God's wondrous grace" - #338

Pray: *Lord of all, we pray for our co-workers, our leaders, our friends, those who please us, and those who rub us the wrong way. Help us to see our kinship, and to bless and forgive each other. Amen.*

Questions for reflection, journaling, or discussion:

Do you feel supported by your church? By your family?

Day 2 – The Day of Journey Morning: *Get Up And Go!*

Read: Genesis 12:1-9

Now the LORD said to Abram, "go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you." (Genesis 12:1)

I was a few months away from graduating from college and my plans were set: Take a year or two off from school, get a job, pay some debts, and maybe consider going to seminary some day when I'd had a chance to think it through. Then came a call from the dean of Bethany Theological Seminary telling me there was a scholarship available if I came that fall – and *only* that fall. It was absolutely the wrong time for me to go to seminary. Jennie and I were broke and in debt. But we changed our plans and went.

The three most difficult years of our lives, financially and emotionally, followed. But now we see this sudden change in our journey as ordained by God. We were called and we answered.

Over the years I've learned that it's hardly ever the "right" time for important changes in our lives. Our first child, the first church we served, the call to the second church, and of course the opportunities to serve at times of disasters – none of these happened at a very good time.

It could be that as you rushed about in your preparations for the journey you were quite aware that this is not the best time for service in God's name. But there it is. God called Abram and Sarai to set out on a journey with only a promise. Both were at an advanced age, with one of their major goals in life – having a child – unfulfilled. The path that lay ahead was long and winding and full of frustrations. But it was God's journey and it ended well.

You're on God's journey, too. Have fun!

Sing: "Obey my voice" - #163

Pray: *Lord God of my life and time, I offer to you now my resistance to the life of change to which you have called me. Guide our group as we consider changes in life which you may have called us towards - ones we have ignored and which now we hope to embrace. Amen.*

Questions for reflection, journaling, or discussion:

When have you answered God's call? What has it meant for your family?

When have you ignored God's call because of discomfort, inconvenience or timidity?

Day 2 Evening: *Simple Grace*

Read: Genesis 12:1-9

I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing.
(Genesis 12:2)

I remember the simple grace we shared at table when I was a child – “Bless us, O Lord, and these thy gifts which we are about to receive from thy bounty, through Christ our Lord, Amen.” I wasn't sure about that word bounty. There'd been a mutiny on the Bounty, and I wasn't sure how that connected with the prayer, but I knew it was important to always give thanks to God and to ask for God's blessing.

God promised Abram, as he and Sarai set out on their journey that he would become a blessing to others. As you unpack your bags - and catalog what you forgot to bring as well as what you remembered - bear in mind that you are about to become a blessing to people in need. Much of Abram's journey was shrouded in mystery. By contrast, you will see those people you are blessing. . . .And they will see you.

You may have gathered with other group members by now. If so, share the following litany together:

ONE: Now the LORD said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. (Genesis 12:3)

ALL: *By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going.* (Hebrews 11:8)

ONE: Praise the LORD, all you nations! Extol him, all you peoples! (Psalm 117:1)

ALL: *For great is his steadfast love toward us, and the faithfulness of the LORD endures forever. Praise the LORD!* (Psalm 117:2)

Pause for silent reflection

Close by singing “Go with Abram, Go with Sarai”

Day 9 Evening: *In Our Genes*

Read: Matthew 25:31-46

Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me. (Matthew 25:40)

In 2003, I attended the Brethren World Assembly at Winona Lake, Indiana. Folks from all six major Brethren bodies in the US – and many from international Brethren groups, as well – gathered to focus on missions. Our scripture text was Matthew 25.

Christopher Bowman of Martinsburg, Pennsylvania, who was the Church of the Brethren Annual Conference moderator at the time, addressed the Assembly: *We are born with the DNA of Matthew 25 in our genes. We can't seem to imagine giving the good news without giving the good works.*

Marcos Inhauser, national director for Brazil, Global Mission Partnerships, emphasized the importance of this passage at the same gathering when he described the way all Brethren engage in missions. Just as a bird requires two wings to fly, so the church needs both the Great Commission commanded by Jesus in Matthew 28 and the service required by Jesus in Matthew 25. Using the analogy that a bird cannot fly with one wing, Inhauser emphasized that the church needs both “devotion and deeds” in carrying out its mission.

For your evening devotions, ponder these words from Scripture: *What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill," and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.* (James 2:14-17)

Sing: “Wonderful grace of Jesus” - #150

Questions for reflection, journaling, or discussion:

Was it easy or difficult today to tell if you are doing good?
What was the most striking event of the day?

Questions for reflection, journaling, or discussion:

How will your work today fit in with Jesus' discourse in Matthew 25?

to the tune of AR HYD Y NOS ("Go My Children" - #433, words on page 42 at the back)

Questions for reflection, journaling, or discussion:

What have you left undone at home?

What waits for you when you return?

Day 3 Morning: *Don't Take It Personally*

Read: Psalm 22

*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you
so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?
(Psalm 22:1)*

In the midst of horrific suffering Jesus cried this verse aloud from the cross in Hebrew: “Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?” (Mark 15:34) Some of the bystanders, who considered themselves good religious folk thought he was crying to Elijah for rescue. These people were probably church goers, but they didn’t understand that Jesus in crying aloud was quoting the first line of Psalm 22, which begins in despair and confusion, but ends in the assurance of vindication.

Whether you’re working with children or adults during your time of volunteer service, it is important to realize that you will be hearing people speak in the language of suffering. That means you may hear with your natural ear a group of words . . . and not realize that something entirely different is being communicated. A complaint about you or other service workers or the aid that is offered may really be a complaint against the disaster, or the universe, or God.

The best way to translate the language of suffering is to remember that you have suffered as well. No one rides free in this life. Your brokenness is what you have to offer to others, and is your best ticket to understanding and healing.

Sing: “Precious Lord, take my hand” - #575

Pray: *Lord, why have you forsaken so many? Why is there so much pain? I offer you my brokenness, my sorrow, my shame, so that I may serve You in this hurting world. Amen.*

Questions for reflection, journaling, or discussion:

Do you feel ready to start?

Have you cleared your mind of preconceptions?

Day 9 Morning: *Precious Pages*

Read: Matthew 25:31-46

*...for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something
to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me
clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.
(Matthew 25:35-36)*

Over thirty years ago, along with some fellow college students, I stopped to visit a Brethren church, whereupon I was introduced to a very old woman who spoke virtually no English. Through an interpreter, I learned that, many decades before, she had survived the terrible genocide inflicted on the Armenians by the Turks around 1920.

Clutching a scrap of paper in her hand, she told us that this was a piece of scripture she had smuggled out of Armenia. She wept fresh tears as she thought of those times.

Though she certainly now had access to an entire Bible, that scrap of the Word of God remained precious to her. Whenever I think of that woman I wonder what scrap of scripture I would hold on to if I could only smuggle out one precious piece.

Certainly for Brethren, today’s passage from Matthew would be a candidate for preservation if I had to choose only one portion from the Bible. And I’m not the only one who thinks so.

Paroled murderer Nathan Leopold (famous for committing “The Crime of the Century”) wrote, *If I were to try to summarize the ministry of the Church of the Brethren in a single scripture, I should surely choose Matthew 25:35-36. The church . . . does, indeed, feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and give drink to the thirsty. To me, this is the quintessence of the Christian ethic.*

Scripture Focus: *So let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest-time, if we do not give up.* (Galatians 6:9) Let one group member speak this verse aloud; then let others reflect on it in silence. The leader may read it aloud one more time. Focus in on one word. Listen to that one word. *Is God speaking to you this morning?* Close by reciting the verse together.

Prayer Focus: *God of glory, we thank you for this opportunity to serve once more in your name, even as we grow more weary. Amen.*

children. Together we praise your name. Amen.

Day 3 Evening: *Disorganized Disaster*

Read: Psalm 22:19-31

The poor shall eat and be satisfied; those who seek him shall praise the LORD. May your hearts live forever! (Psalm 22:26)

I am such a disorganized person that it is essential that I begin the day with a to-do list. I try to figure out where I have to be - and when - who I'll visit, what I'll do, and how I'll know when I've accomplished everything.

That looks good on paper, but my work as a pastor involves caring ministries. So, I can't quantitatively measure caring or mark off when it is fully accomplished. Caring is part of a relationship, and is never really fulfilled as long as the relationship is still being fulfilled.

Psalm 22:26 promises that those who are suffering will eat and be satisfied - but this promise is in the future tense and not yet accomplished. This will be fulfilled in God's future. For now the ministry of caring that you are engaged in will not be finished or fulfilled in our lifetimes.

Aid in the face of disasters has to include a lot of to-do lists. Certain essentials must be accomplished. You probably have learned what you are to do and how you are to accomplish it. Moreover, it's likely that your part in this story is limited to the term of service to which you have been called. But in a deeper sense your work can never be completed. You're here as part of a chain of caring people.

Seek the Lord, praise the Lord, rest assured that the poor shall eat and be satisfied, and relax if you didn't seem to get everything done today. If you've been busy caring for others, you've accomplished a great deal . . . the caring will continue.

Sing: "Guide my feet"- #546

Pray: *Lord, into your hands we commit and commend our spirits as we work together for the fulfilling of your mission and ministry. Amen.*

Questions for reflection, journaling, or discussion:

What was today like? Was it clear to you what you were to accomplish?

Do you feel like you accomplished anything?

Are you tired? Frustrated? Excited? Encouraged?

Day 4 Morning: *Perspective*

Read: Lamentations 1

Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by? Look and see if there is any sorrow like my sorrow, which was brought upon me, which the LORD inflicted on the day of his fierce anger.
(Lamentations 1:12)

I'm an American. As a voracious reader, I pay attention both to our history, as well as to that of the world. Like most Americans, I can tell you where I was when I first heard what was happening on September 11, 2001. As I watched events unfold on television, I felt the same horror, sense of loss, frustration, and sorrow as everyone else.

Yet I recall that the next day most of us got our mail, filled up our gas tanks, and went to the store for milk. Most of America's systems, as well as society in general, were largely untouched by this tragedy; yet *we acted as if no one had ever suffered like us.*

But, folks, let's consider that only a few years ago *a million people died in Rwanda* - one by one, most of them killed by machete. Furthermore, genocide raged unchecked in the former Yugoslavia and the Sudan for many years.

And, bad as it was, even the devastation caused by Hurricane Katrina in 2005 (which exposed our own shortcomings in responding to the sufferings of others) would not have been as extensive if we had responded more quickly.

The events described in Lamentations remind us that people have witnessed the total breakdown of civilization and society, enduring unspeakable horrors, without losing their sense of humanity. The book itself attests to the fact that the people had not lost their faith in God.

None of America's worst moments can match the worst times endured by those in other countries. We tend to be a self-centered people who do not understand how much others suffer.

You, as a volunteer, do not have all the answers. You may not even know the right questions. But you are there, on the spot, as a reminder that we have not yet fully collapsed as a society. We're still able to respond. We're only human, but there's hope.

Sing: "Lord, listen to your children" - #353

Pray: *Ever present God, help me to serve as a reminder that you are present,*

Day 8 Evening: *Whirlwinds*

Pray together Psalm 71:1-6:

ONE: In you, O LORD, I take refuge; let me never be put to shame.

ALL: *In your righteousness deliver me and rescue me; incline your ear to me and save me.*

ONE: Be to me a rock of refuge, a strong fortress, to save me, for you are my rock and my fortress.

ALL: *Rescue me, O my God, from the hand of the wicked, from the grasp of the unjust and cruel.*

ONE: For you, O LORD, are my hope, my trust, O LORD, from my youth.

ALL: *Upon you I have leaned from my birth; it was you who took me from my mother's womb. My praise is continually of you.*

In 1965 a series of devastating tornadoes - that collectively became known as "The Palm Sunday Tornadoes" - swept through the state of Indiana, killing hundreds of people and destroying countless homes. Two and a half decades later, I accepted the call to pastor a church in Elkhart County, where many had lost their homes. When visiting families for the first time, I would ask what they remembered of their experience.

For some, whose home had survived, the memories included the feeling of guilt - and how that motivated them to provide relief work to others. For some who had lost all their possessions, their memories sometimes surprised me.

One woman could not forget the box of donuts she'd bought that morning. Her entire home had been destroyed, every possession lost, but she kept shaking her head and repeating the fact that they'd never gotten the chance to eat those donuts. *Every one of the donuts was lost* along with everything else.

Sometimes what strikes us is so overwhelming that we simply can't absorb the bigger picture. During disaster clean up or repair or child care, our focus is on a small part of the devastation. Sometimes, though, the small images converge to form a clear, unified impression.

If the thought of donuts hasn't made you and your group think of something that would taste good right about now you're not breathing. One of you should go out and score some treats.

Sing: "Praise to the Lord, the Almighty" - #37

Pray together: *Lord of love, you are our refuge and our strength, a present help in times of trouble. This day we pray for your light to shine in our midst as we gather together as your people. In good times and in bad, we pray for the strength to tell of your wonderful deeds throughout the earth. You are our hope; we are your*

Questions for reflection, journaling, or discussion:

What do people see when they see you?

Do they see the church when they see you at work?

even here, even now. Amen.

Questions for reflection, journaling, and discussion:

What have you seen today as you work with others?

What have those who are suffering said to you?

Day 4 Evening: *As Hopeful As A-B-C*

Read: Lamentations 3:19-24

The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.

(Lamentations 3:22-23)

If you take time to read the book of Lamentations you will be struck by the depth of human suffering that is lamented – hence the name. The total collapse of society due to a military invasion, and the resulting suffering that seems beyond expression, nevertheless finds expression in this writing.

What you may not realize is that the first four chapters are acrostics – that is, the first line of each chapter begins with *Aleph*, the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet; the second line with *Beth*, the second letter; the third line with *Gimel*, the third letter; and so on through the Hebrew alphabet (22 letters).

In other words, even in the midst of untold grief, the author has the presence of mind to compose a thoughtful and well-crafted poem. God's creative Spirit remains present with God's people even when everything falls apart. Memory is not only preserved but also expressed in unforgettable poetry. And at the heart of this poem are the verses you've just read. Words that affirm - without any visible proof – the unquenchable belief of the poet: God remains faithful in all circumstances.

In the Bible, songs of Lamentations are heartfelt and heartrending, yet always include somewhere a note of hope: God has not forgotten us; God will not forget us.

There is a marvelous sentence from the book *Till We Have Faces*, by C.S. Lewis, in which he reminds us that sometimes God doesn't give us an answer. Sometimes God is the answer. It is the presence of God that never fails. And that presence finds its best expression in God's abiding love.

The thought of affliction and homelessness bears down upon the soul, but God lifts us up on eagle's wings. You are a representative of God's presence and love. If you're starting to feel tired or weary, remember: God will bear you up as well.

Sing: "Great is thy faithfulness" - #327

Pray: *Great is your faithfulness, Lord God Almighty. Help me to likewise be faithful in service to others, especially in the days that lie ahead. Amen.*

Questions for reflection, journaling, and discussion:

What signs of hope have you seen today?

How is the presence of God evident to you and others who are helping?

Day 8 Morning: *Glory!*

Read: Psalm 29

The voice of the LORD causes the oaks to whirl, and strips the forest bare; and in his temple all say, "Glory!" (Psalm 29:9)

Glory! Disasters strip the landscape bare. Who can stand in such a situation? How about Helena Kruger? Not one to let a strict interpretation of the law prevent her from carrying out the gospel message with the same tireless drive as an apostle, Kruger became known as a no-nonsense whirlwind of a Brethren Service worker in post World War II Austria. Helena aggressively requisitioned supplies, then brought in refugees to provide labor, resulting in schools and health facilities rising from the blackened ashes of the ruins and rubble.

She especially targeted the needs of children - in many cases German children - who, because of their ancestry, were denied access to schools, hospitals, and social services. (She understood that brutalized children often grow up to become the next generation of warriors.) Tuberculosis became another major problem in the war-ravaged country. Thanks to Helena's tireless efforts, a former Nazi labor camp barracks in Thalham was transformed into a sanatorium and hospital.

When unable to obtain supplies through regular channels, Helena commandeered them any way she could. (An American general, after giving her everything she had asked for, noted, *I could have been court-martialed . . . , but how can you say 'No' to Mrs. Kruger?*)

Nor was Helena above taking advantage of her reputation as a selfless relief worker. Russian soldiers - who enjoyed her jokes and appreciated her knowledge of their language - regularly waved Helena through their checkpoints without inspection, unaware that she often smuggled refugees in her car trunk from the Russian zone of occupation to the American side. Thus, Helena Kruger became a familiar sight, pulling up to a checkpoint in her jeep, often greeted by shouts of *Here Comes the Church!*

And that's what happens when you arrive on the disaster site: *Here Comes the Church!*

Sing: "We give thee but thine own" - #384

Pray: *God beyond our comprehension, God greater than our imaginings, we praise you for revealing yourself in clear ways for our benefit that we might praise your glory all the louder. We confess, though, that we have tried to limit you to a few images, almost as if to control you. We let go of that now and praise you for who you are, not who we would have you be. Strip our lives bare, Lord, of power and might. Whirl us around like the oaks in a storm. Let all in your temple cry "Glory!" Hallelujah! Amen.*

Which is the more powerful witness – words or deeds?
What is the most significant “current event” of your life?

Day 5 Morning: *For Such a Time As This*

Read: Esther 4

Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this.” (Esther 4:14)

There comes a point in every endeavor of service where you have to wonder – *What am I doing here?* Maybe you’re working on a project you feel you can handle – repairing a single home. But this may only be part of a much larger project - one that may take years or even decades to repair, the handling of which even the experts disagree. Once you’re in this predicament it’s hard to see your way out. Even if there is no way out, there is a way.

God wants you here, right now, at this time. Hard to say why. You may be pretty good at what you’re doing, but there’s always someone better. Or maybe you’re a fish out of water, struggling to adapt your skills to the task.

Esther felt that way. The winner of a beauty contest, suddenly she was called to save her people from genocide. In response to her Uncle Mordecai’s challenge, Esther takes significant action: she creates a community of prayer.

I hope you and your team are praying together. And, if you get the chance to call home, make sure you recruit your family, church, and even larger circles, to join you in prayer. It may be the most important thing you do on this trip.

It may be why you were called for such a time as this.

Sing: “Dona nobis pacem” - #346

Litany:

One: *God’s kingdom will come in a perfect future.*

All: *God’s will shall be done in a perfect time.*

One: *God reigns now, and his kingdom is perfectly in our midst.*

All: *May God’s will be our will in all we do.*

One: *Let us seek this kingdom, and God’s righteousness, that all things may be added to us.*

All: *Let the peace of God dwell richly in us today and always.*

Unison Prayer: *Lord, grant us peace. Lord, grant us the courage to grasp peace. Lord, grant us the strength to become your people. You have called us for such a time as this. We respond, not only with our presence here at worship, but by our belief in you that sustains us all the days of our week. God of glory, our hearts long for your kingdom. Let your will be done in our lives as your people. Amen.*

Questions for reflection, journaling, and discussion:

Name one problem that seems insoluble.

Compose a prayer putting this into God's hands.

Day 5 Evening: *Love is Stronger*

Read: Song of Songs 8:6-7

*Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm;
for love is strong as death, passion fierce as the grave. (Song
of Songs 8:6)*

Day 5 is closing. *Ouch!* A team member may have experienced an injury by now. At the very least, most of you are probably feeling aches and pains. You are far from the comforts of hearth and home. Most likely the only thing that's keeping you from complaining even more about the discomforts you are experiencing is that you are serving *People Who Are Recovering From A Disaster!* You know they have it worse than you.

Yet, how do we measure suffering? Whose suffering is greater? And why does some suffering elicit a response, while other suffering goes unnoticed or unheralded?

Take the Great Chicago Fire of October 8, 1871. It is the stuff of legend. Whether or not Mrs. O'Leary's cow really was responsible, 2100 acres burned in the city, with 250 lives lost. People across the country (even around the world) read with horror the accounts of loss of life and property, as well as the terrible suffering of the people. Relief came from all quarters. Chicago re-emerged.

Most people, however, have never heard of the Great Peshtigo Fire that happened only a couple hundred miles north of Chicago *on the very same night!* After an especially dry summer, wind kicked up scattered grassland and woods fires creating a fire tornado that destroyed over half the town. The fire traveled so fast that people burst into flame. 1200 lives were lost and 1.2 million acres were destroyed, making it the worst fire in US history.

Regardless of the numbers, for those who lost loved ones, both fires qualified as the worst in the world. And that is what this particular verse (cited above) speaks to. Set in the context of a collection of love poems, this particular Hebrew poem reminds us that, though death is inevitable, the grave cannot conquer love.

In the end, it does not matter whose suffering is greater. What matters is the love we bring to our task.

Sing: "Seek ye first the kingdom of God" - #324

Read aloud Song of Songs 8:6; then pray silently, meditating upon its meaning for you.

What do you think really happened to cause this disaster?

Why these people and not others?

Day 7 Evening: *Current Events*

Read: Luke 13:1-9

*Now there were some present at that time who told Jesus about
the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices.
(Luke 13:1)*

Over forty years ago, in the middle of December 1963, my family stopped for only a few minutes in Dallas as we drove from Virginia to California to begin a new life. My father took time to point out the sixth floor of the Texas Book Depository. Less than a month before, a man had leaned out of a window and killed a president. At that time it was a current event. It still is.

It takes time to know if a "current event" is as significant over the long haul as it seems at the time. And it takes perspective to understand what such events mean. When people asked Jesus his opinion of one current event, he responded by reciting the tale of another. Neither was significant enough for historians to record, so we know nothing beyond the bare references in scripture. Yet, in the parable that followed, Jesus made it clear that, regardless of the peaks and valleys in any particular age, the time is so urgent that our shared life of faith in Christ remains most important.

As a volunteer, you are helping folks who are experiencing the current event of their lives. (At least that's how it seems to them now.) Only time will tell if this event is an historical landmark or just a blip on the screen of life. But regardless, it's important that you share your faith in Jesus Christ. It's not always necessary to do it with words. Indeed, if you are working with agencies such as the American Red Cross, then it is important to respect their rules.

Your actions speak far louder than any personal testimony, anyhow. Show people what Jesus is like.

Sing: "Are ye able?" (on page 42 at the back)

Pray: *Lord, with your help we pray that we have made a difference in someone's life today – in your name. Amen.*

Questions for reflection, journaling, or discussion:

How did you live service today?

How were you ministered to by those you came to serve?

Day 7 Morning: *Bad Things Happen To Good People*

Read: Luke 13:1-9

(Jesus) asked them, *Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans?* (Luke 13:2)

It's possible that, when some of your friends – or those at church or in your community - heard you were going out on disaster relief, let you know why the people you are serving deserve what they got: *They listened to the authorities before the disaster hit. They didn't listen to the authorities before the disaster hit. . . . They took precautions. They didn't take precautions.... They knew better.... They should have known better. God was with them.... God wasn't with them.*

There's no escaping it. Some people think that good things happen only to good people, and that bad things happen only to bad people. So, when disaster strikes, they begin trying to figure out what people affected did wrong - rather than accept the fact that this is a broken world, that bad things happen, and yet somehow we survive. . . especially if we stick together.

Woul'da, coulda, shoulda. Jesus doesn't play this game. In today's scripture text some folks call to mind the recent murder of some Galileans (possibly guerillas) by the hand of Pontius Pilate. Jesus insists these hapless Galileans were no worse people than everyone else. He goes his questioners one better: How about those killed when the Tower of Siloam fell on them? Were they worse than those who stepped out of the way just in time? *No.* Jesus wants us to grapple with the real question: *Are we ready to meet God?*

The people you are serving did not deserve what has happened to them. . . especially the children. By volunteering, you have chosen to avoid the blame game, and instead, in the name of Jesus, have come to serve.

Good for you!

Sing: "Just as I am, without one plea" - #516

Pray: Psalm 71:1-6, ending with:

Lord of love, You are our refuge and our strength, a present help in times of trouble. This day we pray for your light to shine in our midst as we gather together as your people. In good times and in bad, we pray for strength to tell of your wonderful deeds throughout the earth. You are our hope. We are Your children. Together, we praise Your name. Amen.

Questions for reflection, journaling, and discussion:

What questions come to mind as you work?

Questions for reflection, journaling, and discussion:

Choose one word from the key verse. Focus on the word.

What is God telling you about that word?

Day 6 Morning: *What God Looks Like*

Read: John 13:1-17

Jesus said: *So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you.* (John 13:14-15)

No one has pushed the Brethren into service and mission more than M.R. Zigler. Zigler grew up in Linville Creek, Virginia, where his sense of hospitality and service was fueled by his mother's example. Their guest room was often occupied, and meals provided for any traveler, regardless of economic condition or racial background.

Zigler was one of those whose fires were fed by the divided witness of Brethren leaders during World War I. Thus, he worked with other peace churches in a proactive fashion – helping to forge a productive relationship with government that protected the rights of those who for reasons of conscience would not kill.

During the war and afterwards, Zigler had a hand in pretty much every facet of what we know as the Brethren Service Miracle, including (*take a deep breath!*): founding of Heifer Project, International; creation of the Brethren Service Commission and its role in the reconstruction of Europe after the World War; the pivotal position of the Brethren Service Center in New Windsor to channel material and human resources in the US and around the world; the seminal role played by the Church of the Brethren in the foundation of Church World Service and CROP; and the model provided by Brethren Volunteer Service for the founding of Peace Corps.

Some administrators, anxious to shunt M.R. to the side, “exiled” him to Europe, where he played an important role in the founding of the World Council of Churches. Representatives of churches far larger than the Brethren marveled at all the denomination had accomplished. When Zigler was asked to explain the Brethren Service Miracle, he pointed to the Love Feast (and especially the Feet Washing) as a symbol that compelled Brethren into the world to serve.

The Brethren Love Feast symbolizes that there is nothing we won't do when it comes to serving each other! On disaster location, you're probably not able to keep as clean as you do at home. You may be sweating a lot without air conditioning if it is summer, or trying hard to stay warm if it is winter. Today may not be a good day for Feet Washing. But it's a good day to live the concept.

Sing: “Will you let me be your servant” - #307

Pray: *Lord, we pray our work will reveal the face of Christ to others. Amen.*

Questions for reflection, journaling, and discussion:

If you are Brethren, share a Love Feast memory with other team members.

Draw a picture, symbol, or squiggle that makes you think of service and peace.

Day 6 Evening: *A Cup of Cold Water*

Read: Philippians 2:1-13

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness.... (Philippians 2:5-7)

Many commentators believe that the Apostle Paul, by using the image of slavery, is calling to mind the feetwashing as demonstrated by Jesus in John 13. Certainly that task was relegated to slaves. Before Jesus washed His disciples' feet, no piece of literature portrayed a superior washing the feet of those considered inferior. That's why Peter was so shocked at Jesus' action.

And that's why, in our very human endeavors, we will not be afraid to present the human side of Jesus, and our own human side as well.

M.R. Zigler, about whom we spoke this morning, worked tirelessly for peace. His strong – some would say abrasive – style insured that much of what he planned got done. To this day, people tell stories of how he would dominate or sidetrack or even commandeer a meeting. Given five minutes to speak, he might not stop talking for an hour. Though warned that he might not be invited back if he took such an advantage, M.R. never failed to make his pitch for peace. For every denominational official who got his feathers ruffled, many more were inspired by him towards service.

He agitated and aggravated others to great feats in America and Europe. Kenneth Kreider in his book *A Cup of Cold Water* refers to Zigler's “...indomitable way, which many others learned was extremely difficult to ignore or refute....” Indeed, those who knew him recount stories about the man with either a delighted or rueful smile. Either way, M.R. was unforgettable.

Be unforgettable in your resolve to do what is necessary in service for others. In this way, imitate Jesus, who “though he was in the form of God, did not regard . . .” - but you can read the rest yourself! Do so.

Quotation for Meditation: *Let us imitate the Lord, who at the very time of His Passion was not more proud but more humble.* (Cyprian, Bishop of Carthage)

Sing: “Softly and tenderly Jesus is calling” - #491

Pray together: Psalm 25

Questions for reflection, journaling, and discussion: