08.10.25 ~ Pentecost 9
"Blessings from Disaster"
The United Baptist Church, Annandale, VA

Genesis 2:1-7 NKJV
1 Thus the heavens and the earth were completed in all their vast array. 2 By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work. 3 Then God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done.
4 This is the account of the heavens and the earth when they were created, when the Lord God made the earth and the heavens. 5 Now no shrub had yet appeared on the earth and no plant had yet sprung up, for the Lord God had not sent rain on the earth and there was no one to work the ground, 6 but streams came up from the earth and watered the whole surface of the ground. 7 Then the Lord God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.

Leader: These Are the Words of God.
People: Thanks be to God!

John 1:1-14 NIV
1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2 He was with God in the beginning. 3 Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. 4 In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. 5 The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

6 There was a man sent from God whose name was John. 7 He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all might believe. 8 He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light.

9 The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world. 10 He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. 11 He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. 12 Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God— 13 children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.

14 The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

Leader: These Are God's Words of Assurance.
All: Thanks be to God!

Please pray with me:
Almighty God, we thank you for your majesty and the beauty of creation. We marvel at times at the power and devastation that is part of our world through weather events and violence. You created us for strength and work as well as love, and it seems we need more resilience and fortitude each day. Help us to see and hear

your creative blessings from Scripture and the stories today assuring us that in Jesus we have the true light and a miraculous partner. May these words spoken touch our minds and hearts with the courage and hope of Jesus. In his name we pray, Amen.

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It feels so good to be back! Thank you for welcoming Sean and Cara last week. Thank you too for your fellowship and leadership in my absence. It was a good week of rest, renewal, and inspiring vistas. Except for the lake on the cover of the bulletin, my views looked a lot like the photo. As you can see from the painting reproductions on the altar table, Asheville, North Carolina is surrounded by the Blue Ridge Mountains. Even though I grew up in Front Royal at the foot of the Blue Ridge, this city was built on and in the mountains with breathtaking natural views all around, but the creation passages in Genesis took on new meaning.

In our passage for today, God had spent six days creating heaven and earth; skies, air and water; and finally human beings, all out of chaos. There were no mountains or trees because the rain had not yet come. He created Sabbath rest for himself on the seventh day, what we call Sunday. It was only out of this rested and fulfilled energy that he formed with his own hands and breath human beings, both "male and female" in his wonderful image. **The entire creation narrative is about God's blessing on the world and humankind**. For our purposes today it is not a lesson on literal actions taken, but rather a reminder that by creation itself, God blesses those he loves. He also imbues the qualities of creation and creative activity within us.

The idea of the natural world being a blessing is always comforting to me whether I am by the ocean experiencing the rhythms of the waves and the vastness of the horizon, a sunset, or at the base of a 3,500-foot

mountain trail looking straight up with anxiety of its ascent. As I drove along the Blue Ridge through manmade rock tunnels, it became so clear and appropriate to define the **whole creation as a blessing from God**. We awaken each day with our to-do lists and chores, watching man's destructive tendencies in the news and we forget how blessed we are by God to live in such surroundings or to live and breathe at all. Think of your favorite hymns, *Showers of Blessing*, and *Count Your Many Blessings*. As I left this resilient area on Friday, I pondered the renewal and regeneration of all disaster areas and how we pray for them—both natural geographic and manmade catastrophes. We are a durable people.

In our second passage we are reminded that Jesus, called the Word, was with God at Creation; the Greek word *pros* means "in the company of" and in this case, it means with God, in the company of God at the time of creation: "[3] Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made (John 1:3)." We also know that Jesus dwells within each of us who believe in the triune God. Does that mean that Jesus was and always is with all the people experiencing a natural disaster like Hurricane Helene in 2024 or the recent floods and loss of life and property in Texas and other states? Or during the destruction of any just war? We can focus on the bleak sides of disaster and lack of resources OR we can look for blessings as they come along in the middle of it all. One artist and her husband I met compiled this book after the pandemic and before the flood, *Messages to the Heart: Reflections of Beauty and Truth*, by Elise and Phil Okrend. They signed a copy and pointed out page 58 so I could quote it:

> Many times new direction is forged from setback, disappointment and even tragedy. It is in those times that our character is tested and what calls into our souls is the essence of who we are. We are not here to focus just on comfort, playing it safe, playing it small. We are here to grow, learn, evolve. Other people will test us, conditions will test us, and even mother nature will test us. Out of these tests can come resiliency, determination and the coming together with others to find better ways, to move beyond the past. When you are in the midst of a challenging situation, don't despair. Look ahead and build a new, better way that may very well take you from here to the stars.

Based on several artists' stories I heard there was an acceptance and a strong sense of resilience, a desire to pull together to help one another—all different ages, social status, races, ethnicities, and incomes.

On September 26, 2024, Category 4 Hurricane Helene made landfall in Florida and then moved inward and northward. Rain traveled down the mountains and over 20 inches swelled the local rivers cresting at over 25-30 feet, roughly the height of a three-story building:

> "Water speed turbocharged the destruction. 'In the Appalachian Trail town of Hot Springs, the French Broad River pulsed at 101,000 cubic feet per second—equal to the amount of water flowing over Niagara Falls in high season (excerpts from Stronger than the Storm, ed. Shelley McKechnie, pg. 9).'"

Because of the rain and 60+ mph hurricane winds, 100-year-old trees toppled over onto roads, houses and art studios. By the next day, no one had power or egress. In the southern Appalachian region, there were more than 2,000 landslides, mostly in Western North Carolina. Other states and areas were indeed decimated, but my resources only focus on the area I visited. And although they have cleaned, cleared, and rebuilt much, there was still evidence of destruction in certain areas especially along the rivers. The death toll was 104.

I found a local interest book of flood stories at the bookstore where all profits went to local recovery efforts, so some of this sermon comes from the artists who contributed their testimonies. More than 1.5 million cubic yards of debris blocked everything, but people came together as they were able; neighbors checked in on neighbors, brought and used their chainsaws, shared resources, and helped spread information by word of mouth. Large store and church parking lots became "Grill before it Rots" sites for meal gathering, showering stations, potable water trucks and supply distribution hubs. With no electricity, clean water, or internet for weeks, they were truly isolated. Shelter, coffee, food safety, cell phone service, gas, and hospital medical care were crucial. Local hotels filled quickly with disaster relief workers who were welcomed and shown Christ's hospitality just as they were trying to provide hospitality to survivors. ***Vital hospitality*** was truly lived out for many months during recovery.

Much of the artwork was not salvageable, however someone collected images of the lost works from social media and websites into a book called *The Flood Collection* and all money goes to River Arts District reconstruction. The fine art pieces in these galleries were and still are valued in the thousands and tens of thousands of dollars per piece. One notable artist, Jaime Bird, had one painting rescued and after hosing off the initial mud, noticed beaver paw prints stuck on it, and decided to keep it as it was as a reminder that life goes on. Its image is on page 23 of *Stronger than the Storm* book. Another artist used this calamity to shift her work from what she called superficial, bright cheerful flower colors to earthier hues with muddy textures showing the colors of bright green new

growth from blades of grass beneath the muddy browns. One seventy-seven-year-old survivor spoke of grief that is still with her daily and will take more months to overcome as she remembers her lost work, but she is grateful for the community of artists and businesses who surround her with love and understanding. Recently she felt a new strength as tourists begin to come back, music fills the air, galleries and studios reopen, people process the trauma, and life rises like a mythical phoenix or a Christian resurrection. Let us continue to pray for these souls producing beauty and meaning as we do our part to appreciate what we have and who we love. Amen? Amen! ||

Let us pray. Dear Lord, we come to you with our own disasters and ask for your forgiveness, wisdom, patience, and compassion. Help us to act physically and spiritually to help others in trauma or recovery. Help us too to appreciate all we have and all our many blessings. Please transform our hearts to serve others. Motivate us to be better stewards of this beautiful yet formidable creation. Help us to give sacrificially, trusting you to provide what we need. Thank you for your love, protection, and steadfast presence every day. In Jesus' name, we pray, Amen.