INTRODUCTION
Hurricane Katrina, the first Category 5 hurricane of the 2005 Atlantic hurricane season, combined with Hurricane Rita, forever changed the Gulf Coast region and how the nation views itself. The major damage to the coastal regions of Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama made Hurricane Katrina the costliest natural disaster in the history of the United States. More than 1,000 people died in the wake of the storm and several thousands are still reported missing. As the storm surge breached the levee system that protected New Orleans and flooded 80 percent of that city, illusions about poverty, race, and environmental issues were shattered. In its place, connections about how we treat God’s creation and God’s people came into sharp focus.

VULNERABLE LAND AND PEOPLE: CONNECTIONS
The death, destruction, and environmental degradation in New Orleans and throughout the Gulf of Mexico region brought to light the need for a renewed covenant of community. The wind and waters that battered the Gulf States stripped away our collective blindness to the plight of the poor and marginalized among us and awakened us anew to the challenges faced environmental racism. We were reminded of our dependence on God’s creation and recognized that too often our lifestyle choices despoil the Earth and expose communities to greater natural harm and environmental threats. (Source: adapted from United Methodist Board of Church and Society statement)

Levees, trade, and commerce
Levees were traditionally built not just for flood protection, but to aid in the transport of commerce. As the city poised near the entrance of the Mississippi River, the port of New Orleans has been an epicenter of river trade and commerce for centuries. At the time of Hurricane Katrina, the port handled 11.4 million tons of general cargo annually, including materials such as steel, coffee, wood products, and natural rubber.

The Mississippi River levees, comprised of levees, floodwalls, and various control structures, are 2,203 miles long and are designed to protect the alluvial valley against flooding and allow for commercial shipping and boat navigation. The levees are constructed by the federal government and are maintained by local interests, except for government assistance as necessary during major floods. The levee system in New Orleans was built for the purpose of protecting the city from floods and includes the breeched levees along the Industrial Canal and London Street Canal, which were constructed to allow navigation and drainage into Lake Pontchartrain. While levees can help protect human populations from flood waters and aid in the transport of goods, they also restrict the flow of rivers. This restriction limits sediment deposits along the Mississippi River’s floodplain. Floodplains help maintain healthy river eco-systems by improving water quality and providing habitat and breeding sites for plants and animals. (Source: en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Industrial_Canal)

Two-thirds of Asian Americans and African Americans, a majority of Hispanics, and a plurality of Whites express concern about the potential negative impact of climate change by agreeing that “global warming and weak environmental protection policies have resulted in an increase in the number and power of hurricanes.” (source: New California Media Poll)
CLIMATE CHANGE IMPACTS
Global warming and climate change have dire human health and environmental consequences, especially in marginalized communities that are sited in low-lying areas. While the scientific evidence linking hurricane intensity and global warming is still being studied, Hurricane Katrina and Rita offered striking evidence as to which communities could be hardest hit during climate change events.

Wetlands and Coastal Barriers
Wetlands and natural shoreline ecosystems provide both habitat for wildlife and protect human populations from storms such as hurricanes and tsunamis. Coastal marshes, which trap floodwaters, filter out pollutants and serve as “nurseries” for wildlife, are disappearing nationwide at a rate of 20,000 acres per year. Louisiana alone has lost half a million acres of wetlands since the 1950s. These natural coastal barriers on the Gulf have nearly been destroyed by decades of erosion and industrial use. Although no amount of natural protection can prevent all destruction, environmental degradation almost certainly makes the impact worse.

Toxic Contamination
According to U.S. Coast Guard data, at least 575 spills of toxic chemicals or oil were reported due to Hurricane Katrina and Rita, spilling over 8 million gallons of oil alone. Numerous industrial facilities, Superfund sites, and other toxic hotspots were located in New Orleans and the Gulf Region and impacted the amount of toxic chemicals and oil that were released as a result of the hurricanes. The widespread presence of potentially toxic sediment poses an immediate health risk to returning residents and cleanup workers.

Solid Waste
According to some accounts, over 100 million tons of debris were generated by the hurricanes, ranging from trees and brush to thousands of destroyed homes and an estimated 350,000 ruined vehicles. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and others have already collected thousands of containers of household hazardous waste and other hazardous materials. The cost of debris removal and disposal contracts reportedly exceeded $2 billion. Unsafe disposal of hazardous materials or burning waste will impact human and environmental health.

Water Quality
Drinking water and sewage systems were hit hard by the two storms, leaving more than 2.4 million people without safe drinking water. As of October 10, the EPA reported that 270 public water systems in storm-affected states were still on boil water advisories, and at least 289 systems were still inoperable. The American Water Works Association has estimated that the cost of repairing the drinking water systems alone will be about $2.25 billion dollars. In addition, more than a dozen sewage systems were damaged and could impact water quality in the region.

Environmental Racism
Environmental degradation has traditionally disproportionately impacted communities of color and low income communities. At the time of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, nationwide, 3 out of every 5 African Americans and Latinos lived in communities with toxic waste sites.1 Also, 71 percent of African-Americans and Latinos lived in communities where air pollution violated federal clean air standards (compared with 58% of whites.)2 In New Orleans’ Lower 9th Ward, EPA’s post-hurricane studies showed arsenic levels 75 times higher than residential standards allow.3 While Hurricanes Katrina and Rita impacted all classes and races, communities of color and low income populations bore a larger brunt of the storms’ impacts.

“The situation in New Orleans and the Gulf Coast has pushed three critical issues into the national spotlight. First, Hurricane Katrina dramatically demonstrates our vulnerability to environmental disasters. Second, America still suffers from gross economic inequalities, and these inequalities largely coincide with race. Third, these two issues are linked, and the results can be deadly. Here lies the root cause of the problems that we’ve seen in New Orleans and the Gulf Coast—the environmental and economic vulnerability of people of color and poor communities. There are two terms that aptly describe these intersections of race, class, and the environment: ‘environmental injustice’ and ‘environmental racism.’”
Beverly Wright (Deep South Center for Environmental Justice, Xavier University in New Orleans.)

Sources:
1“Toxic Wastes and Race,” UCC
2Air of Injustice
3The Baton Rouge Advocate
More than 900 houses of worship on the Gulf Coast have been destroyed, seriously damaged or forced to suspend services by hurricanes Katrina and Rita. (source: Religion News Service)

Sermon Notes: Stories from the Crescent City
by Rev. Cory Sparks, Carrollton United Methodist Church, New Orleans, Louisiana

Sing aloud, O daughter Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem! “The LORD has taken away the judgments against you, he has turned away your enemies. The king of Israel, the LORD, is in your midst; you shall fear disaster no more.” “On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem: Do not fear, O Zion…. I will remove disaster from you, so that you will not bear reproach for it…”

These words of Zephaniah never meant much to my congregation. But that was before Hurricane Katrina. Before they escaped their homes in makeshift rafts; before they saved neighbors from rising water; before they learned that a body floated for days on their block. After so much death; after so much devastation; after so much horror, Zephaniah brings good news of great joy: Do not fear, O New Orleans…. I will remove disaster from you. Local, state, and federal officials may have abandoned us in the aftermath of the hurricane, but God has not. The King of Israel, the Lord, was in our midst as we struggled against rising flood waters and escalating violence. And God promises us a way through these times. A new day is coming when flooded homes and burned out streets will be a memory. Through God’s spirit, the city will rebuild in a just way—more in harmony with nature and neighbor. It will be sustainable and protected against hurricane storm surges. And it will be a place where prosperity touches every neighborhood. All God’s people will share in Zephaniah’s hope for a future of flourishing. A hope that seemed unreachable in the days following Katrina.

We live in the promise of Zephaniah, and we trust that the sufferings of these days are the birth pangs of new life. As we repair our homes, we give thanks for the salvation we’ve experienced and we look forward to disaster and death being no more. We see Zephaniah’s promises of joy and restoration fulfilled in Jesus Christ. Through his life, death, and resurrection, Jesus offers a path beyond the darkness that sometimes seems to control the world. By his ministry, and the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit, the old creation is giving way to a new creation: a creation where hope takes hold; where prosperity and wholeness replace poverty and brokenness; and, where despair gives way to joy.

As our neighborhoods rebuild, we embrace the promise of transformation found in Zephaniah. This vision guides our Operation New Creation. Operation New Creation seeks short and long term solutions for relief and recovery. Through this ministry we provide food and supplies to members, neighbors, and visitors. We also sponsor mission teams that clean mold-filled homes throughout the city. In many cases orange, green, and black mold covers everything from floor to ceiling. Our volunteers provide information on potential health consequences to residents. We’ve arranged for a toxicologist to assess other threats in flooded areas so we can protect ourselves and our neighbors.

We’re also seeking a vision for the rebuilding of the community. Many citizens are concerned that contractors, bureaucrats, and a small elite will make decisions for the entire community. Faith-based community organizations and environmental groups hope to remake New Orleans as a more sustainable and just place. If we want disaster removed from us, we need to live in right relationship with the land and one another. We should protect our environment and promote the prosperity of the entire community.

We’re deeply thankful that the Spirit has strengthened us for this work. In these weeks we’ve already seen one victory. The church has partnered with a neighborhood group and a major nonprofit to renovate an abandoned school. For more than a decade the building has sat rotting in the heart of the neighborhood. It’s just a block from a corner that has been the site of multiple murders over recent months. The new school will be a construction careers academy. By January, the college track high school will be preparing students for jobs rebuilding our city. With this school the neighborhood will find a more prosperous and peaceful future. It will be built according to green principles, using materials that are less toxic and more energy efficient. Students will be trained with this same vision of sustainability, learning techniques that will protect God’s Earth and preserve New Orleans’ historic architecture. By working toward a more sustainable future we hope to awaken to a time of flourishing; when we shall fear disaster no more.
Hurricane Katrina, in particular, helped to expose the tragedy of urban poverty. Nearly 50,000 New Orleans’ residents lived in neighborhoods where the poverty rate exceeded 40 percent, compounding the impacts of the hurricane.

Lifestyle Choices Connection
Although Hurricanes Katrina and Rita were natural disasters, the lifestyle choices that we have made as a United States population confounded the storms’ devastation. An industrial area along the Mississippi River between Baton Rouge and New Orleans, nicknamed “Cancer Alley” contains chemical plants that sustained damage from the storms. The plants were located along the Mississippi to facilitate shipping, but have now resulted in Louisiana, one of the most impoverished areas of the country, becoming the most polluted. The area, which contains hundreds of hazardous waste sites from mines, factories, and chemical plants, houses the very industrial sites that produce many of our consumer goods such as vinyl siding, plastics, and oil.

THE CHRISTIAN RESPONSE: OUR CALL TO ACTION
The Gulf Coast Hurricanes are not catastrophes isolated to a subsection of God’s world. They are tragedies that have touched and will continue to touch all of God’s creation, including God’s people. In particular, Hurricanes Katrina and Rita revealed how our consumer lifestyles and the resulting toxic byproducts have compounded the devastation in the Gulf Coast region. Indeed, across the country and around the world, our consumer lifestyles continue to produce silent destruction and undermine the health of marginalized communities. As Christians, we are called to act on our beliefs and to work for justice and peace for all of God’s creation.

As Christians, we are called to act on our beliefs and to work for justice and peace for all of God’s creation. These actions include personal actions, congregational action, and public witness with policy makers.

FOR MORE INFORMATION AND FURTHER STUDY
Hurricane Katrina Relief Resource (Presbyterian Church USA): www.pcusa.org/katrina/worship.htm
Hurricane Emergency Relief Portal (Episcopal Church): www.episcopalchurch.org/3577_64842_ENG_HTM.htm
Peace Signs (Mennonite Church USA): peace.mennolink.org/cgi-bin/m.pl?a=239
When the Wind Blows (United Methodist Church, General Board of Discipleship): www.gbod.org/worship/default.asp?act=reader&item_id=14793
National Hurricane Center: www.nhc.noaa.gov/
FEMA: www.fema.gov/
Worship Resource for After the Hurricane (Evangelical Lutheran Church in America): www.elca.org/disaster/download/05-09-02-katrinaworship.pdf
The United Methodist Church General Board of Church and Society resource: www.umc-bgcs/afterthestorm

ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE DEFINITION—“A condition of environmental justice exists when environmental risks and hazards and investments and benefits are equally distributed without direct or indirect discrimination at all jurisdictional levels and when access to environmental investments, benefits, and natural resources are equally distributed; and when access to information, participation in decision making, and access to justice in environment-related matters are enjoyed by all.”
Source: Participants of Central and Eastern European Workshop on Environmental Justice (Budapest, December 2003)
Through the Eye of a Hurricane: Rebuilding Just Communities

Hurricane Katrina, the first Category 5 hurricane of the 2005 Atlantic hurricane season, combined with Hurricane Rita, forever changed the Gulf Coast region and how the nation views itself. The major damage to the coastal regions of Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama made Hurricane Katrina the costliest natural disaster in the history of the United States. More than 1,800 people died in the wake of the storm, 500,000 were displaced, and some are still reported missing. As the storm surge breached the levee system that protected New Orleans and flooded 80 percent of that city, illusions about poverty, race, and environmental issues were disbanded. In its place, connections about how we treat God’s creation and God’s people came into sharp focus.

The Gulf Coast Hurricanes are not catastrophes isolated to a subsection of God’s world. They are tragedies that have touched and will continue to touch all of God’s creation, including God’s people. In particular, Hurricanes Katrina and Rita revealed how our consumer lifestyles and the resulting toxic byproducts have compounded the devastation in the Gulf Coast region. As Christians, we are called to act on our beliefs and to work for justice for all God’s creation.

Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me. Matthew 25:45 (New Revised Standard Version)

Sending Forth: Acts of Commitment
Leader: Holy One, who creates the heavens and earth, may we bring forth purpose and hope as we join together in a just rebuilding.
People: Guide us in love, Spirit of God.

Leader: O God, who has called us to be the church, may we serve justice and protect the whole creation with a loving and open heart.
People: Guide us in love, Spirit of God.

(portions adapted from a litany by Reverend Dr. Randal Gardner, Rector, Emmanuel Church, Mercer Island, Washington)

For more information about Creation Justice Ministries or its 38 member communions, visit www.creationjustice.org or call 202-827-3975.
Eco-Justice Principles for Rebuilding the Gulf Region

- In clean up and rebuilding, protect public health and God’s creation.
- Restore environmental protections and address patterns of environmental racism.
- Encourage new environmentally sustainable models of economic growth and community in the Gulf Region.
- Expediency in the aftermath of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita cannot be an excuse to weaken or waive environmental protections in the Gulf Coast region.
- Environmental cleanups must be conducted fairly and equitably in every affected community.
- Government agencies need to comply with Executive Order 12898 on Environmental Justice, which addresses environmental justice in minority and low-income populations.
- Jurisdictions in the Gulf Coast region must focus on creating sustainable and environmentally friendly low and moderate income housing.

(source: adapted from the National Black Environmental Justice Network Resolution on Environmental and Economic Justice in the Gulf Coast Region.)

Gathering Meditation
When willows bow and snap under the weight of the wind…
When congregations of raindrops become inland streams flowing where they will…
When the streets are littered with toxic waste, broken dishes, and shattered dreams…
When the wind blows both the wheat and the chaff of our lives in giant swirls.
Good Lord, anchor us in your love!

Response
Ubi caritas et amor, deus ibi est.
Where charity and love are found, God is there.

Prayers of the People
For the victims, human and non-human, of disaster,
*God, hear our prayer.*

For those who labor in the work of recovery and just rebuilding,
*God, hear our prayer.*

For the communities and congregations impacted by the hurricanes,
*God, hear our prayer.*

For those whose lives and health are in peril from toxic hazards resulting from flooding and storms, that they may be saved from this time of peril, we add our voices to the cry,
*God, hear our prayer.*

For those who have gifts to share to restore a vibrant and environmentally sustainable Gulf Region, may your spirit move them.
*God, hear our prayer.*

For healing for the devastated parts of God’s creation,
*God, hear our prayer.*

For the discipline to use the gifts of the Earth to your glory and for the good of all, that we may not add to the harshness of nature’s power,
*God, hear our prayer.*

For justice tempered with mercy, and for peace,
*God, hear our prayer.*

That we may learn from your Holy Spirit to amend our lives according to your word and live in right relationship with the Earth.
*God, hear our prayer.*
FOR GROUP STUDY AND REFLECTION

Q: ‘Environmental racism’ describes the disproportionate toxic burden faced by communities of color. Where did you see evidence of environmental racism in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina? How do our own lives contribute to this injustice? What can people of faith do to ensure all communities are safe from environmental threats?

Q: Do you know of Superfund or toxic release sites in your neighborhood or wider community? Is there a correlation between where those sites are located and the racial-ethnic or socio-economic background of nearby residents?

Q: If your community suffered flooding—would the waters become a “toxic soup”? How might you reduce the number of toxic chemicals and/or waste located in your community? (Source: The United Methodist Church General Board of Church and Society)

IDEAS FOR YOUTH GROUPS OR SUNDAY SCHOOL

Toxic Inventory and Community Scorecards
Have a youth group conduct a toxic audit of the church building and grounds by inventorying all items containing toxic materials (e.g., cleaning products, pesticides). For information on healthy and toxic-free buildings, visit www.healthybuilding.net. Learn about pollution in your own community by using the Environmental Scorecard at www.scorecard.org/env-releases.

Story Time
Read one of the numerous stories in the Bible about justice and caring for God’s world.
• The Greatest Commandment: (Matthew 22:34-40 or Mark 12:28-31) Discuss what it means to love your neighbor as yourself? Who are our neighbors? How are we called to care for our neighbors in the Gulf Region and in other impacted communities?
• The Sheep and the Goats: (Matthew 25:31-45) Discuss who are “the least of these.” How can we care for “the least of these” in the Gulf Coast Region and in other impacted communities?

Collage or Mural
Make an individual collage or class mural that illustrates ways that we can care for God’s people and God’s creation.

Note: Adults may also enjoy the youth activities listed here.

National Wildlife Refuges in Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee and Texas suffered extraordinary and costly damages. Wetland and levee restoration on national wildlife refuges can be crucial for future storm protection on refuges and surrounding communities.
Each year, the National Council of Churches Eco-Justice Program with the Eco-Justice Working Group produces Earth Day Sunday resource materials for congregations wishing to celebrate God’s creation and explore issues pertaining to caring for God’s creation. The 2006 Earth Day Sunday resource materials focus on building just communities, using the lens of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. While the 2006 resource describes the devastation of the Gulf Coast Region in particular, the issues raised of environmental justice and racism, toxics, and consumer lifestyles poses a challenge to people of faith around the world.

The Gulf Coast Hurricanes are not catastrophes isolated to a subsection of God’s world. They are tragedies that have touched and will continue to touch all of God’s creation, including God’s people. In particular, Hurricanes Katrina and Rita revealed how our consumer lifestyles and the resulting toxic byproducts have compounded the devastation in the Gulf Coast Region. The Hurricanes reminded us that toxic waste sites and industrial plants are most often situated in and around marginalized communities—poor neighborhoods and communities of color. The Gulf Coast hurricanes demonstrated how people in poverty are hardest hit by environmental disasters.

**Creation Justice Principles for Rebuilding the Gulf Region**

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(Source: adapted from the National Black Environmental Justice Network Resolution on Environmental and Economic Justice in the Gulf Coast Region.)

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(New Revised Standard Version)