

MARCH 2006
NEW ORLEANS, LOUISIANA

1. Crossing

“How many times in the last six months have you heard people say, where is God?” Father Jerome LeDoux asks from his cypress-stump pulpit at St. Augustine Catholic Church. “God is in the wind and in the rain,” he reassures. “God is in the fire. God is in the water. God is everywhere.”

Where is God? Now that’s a good question.

People in New Orleans talk about the Holy Spirit like you’d talk about the breeze or the heat, like it’s something anyone can feel. They must be desperate for God’s presence. They search for God everywhere, and it appears they often find what they seek. But I wonder, who is holding God accountable?

Driving down the Gulf Coast on Thursday afternoon, I saw little evidence of God but signs of Hurricane Katrina were everywhere. At the first I-10 exit in Mississippi, a pale blue overturned trailer blocked an entrance ramp. Billboards had become empty scaffolds, skewed perpendicular by the wind so that they resembled solar panels. The Biloxi highway sign seemed almost to have melted, its left edge has been sheared away with so much force. Should have realized sooner that finding a working gas station might not be easy.

“*Welcome to the city where people like to eat,*” Earl King sings on the local radio, just as I’m about to cross Lake Ponchartrain. “*There ain’t no city like New Orleans.*”

I’m grooving along, enjoying the beat, when I notice my fuel light glowing amber. Both stations at the Slidell exit are boarded up, so I have no choice but to cross

the world's longest bridge with my tank at the "Empty" mark and a wicked, mileage-eating headwind churning whitecaps all around.

Twenty-five miles later, cursing my own stupidity, I get off at what appears to be a major commercial intersection somewhere in Jefferson Parish. "War zone" is no exaggeration. Traffic lights are out, buildings are gutted, and at weekday rush hour there is no sign of life except for SUVs that periodically dart up to the least visibly damaged gas station, vainly hoping that it might prove operational. I return to the freeway, terrified of stalling, not daring to make another stop until I pull up to my hotel on Canal Street.

After dropping off my luggage, I wander around the hotel for a little while, but I don't feel brave enough to venture outside. The gospel choir rehearsal I had planned to attend is cancelled due to warnings of extreme weather, so I don't have much to do.

I wish I knew somebody in the city—not an interview contact, but a friend, or a friend of a friend. We could go out for dinner... maybe afterwards catch an act at one of the newly reopened jazz clubs.

I had always intended to visit New Orleans, to write a chapter about its unique mix of Roman Catholic and African-American religious heritage. Now those original goals seem trivial. Wait too long, and the story changes on you.

To my relief, apart from a tiny lunatic fringe,¹ religious fundamentalists have not claimed Katrina as God's judgment. Indeed, the Southern Baptist Coalition was among the first and most generous organizations to respond to the crisis, with both donations and volunteer labor.

The people that I interview shrug off the city's reputation for sin. Bourbon Street is for tourists, they say, and Mardi Gras is mostly about the parades and the costumes,

something you take your kids to see. They insist that New Orleans is a deeply religious place—where you will see people in taxi cabs saying rosaries, where it can be difficult to get into Mass on Ash Wednesday. I can't attest to the spiritual character of New Orleans before the hurricane, but if ever there was a time to make folks turn to religion, this has got to be it.

Maybe it's just the high winds, but the people outside on the sidewalk look hunched over, battered and weary, like it's taking everything they have just to walk where they are going. Looking out the hotel's second-story window, I can see an old brick-and-stucco building that might have looked historic under other circumstances. Rusty twisted, crumpled balconies are swaying slightly in the wind. Window panes are broken. It is clearly still abandoned.

Back in my complimentary media lodgings on the 44th floor of the Sheraton Hotel, I feel insulated from conditions on the ground, yet not entirely so. Is it my imagination, or is the building swaying faintly in the wind? A friend who believes in such things told me that New Orleans has a certain energy—"It's not good or bad, not anything supernatural, it's just part of the landscape. You'll see when you get there."

I don't feel anything like that, just a sense of hollowness and anger. Eighteen hundred dead. Hundreds of thousands left homeless. We live in a world where these things happen. Happen all the time, in fact, just a little less often in the United States.

Death is not blind. Death has a special hunger for the poor, the sick, and the weak.

You can say that Katrina was a humanitarian tragedy more than it was a natural disaster, that its losses were magnified by official incompetence and violent looting. You can even blame the natural disaster on rising ocean temperatures caused by human folly

and greed. But that doesn't exactly let God off the hook. You just come back down to the problem of human suffering, which seems a little less remote today than other days. If God made this world and all the people in it, devised our laws of nature and our species' flawed moral character, then surely God bears some responsibility.

Free will is the catch-all explanation, but the people who suffered most in New Orleans were those with the least freedom and control in their lives—those who could not evacuate due to poor health or lack of a car. That is pretty typical for wars and natural disasters all over the world.

Over the next week I will hear many people give thanks to God for saving them from the flood. But I can't help wondering, what about all those people who prayed to God for rescue and drowned anyway? What about the prayers of those who loved them? Where was God then?

2. Central City

The next morning, I fill up with great relief at the Shell on Lee Circle and head on to a meeting of field workers from Catholic Charities. The team assembles weekly at St. John the Baptist Community Center at the edge of Central City, just beyond the Superdome and the financial district. A few months from now, this neighborhood will become notorious for a streak of murders that causes the National Guard to be called back into New Orleans.

Catholic Charities of New Orleans traces its history all the way back to a group of Ursuline nuns who came ashore in 1727. While the organization is still affiliated with the archdiocese, many clients and staff are non-Catholic. The Louisiana Spirit project sends

teams of social workers door-to-door through post-Katrina New Orleans, offering assistance with employment, schooling, post-traumatic stress disorder, lack of insurance, medicine, and housing.

“Outreach changed my life,” says 31-year-old Burke Beyer, a former bartender, now a team leader with Louisiana Spirit. “It really did. I realized I needed to help people, have some deeper meaning in my work.”

Burke and her mother fled the city on a cruise ship—her musician husband had a gig on board. They were the last ship out of the harbor before the storm. “It was a rocky ride,” she remembers. Despite eight inches of water in their Metairie home and ongoing insurance disputes, she counts herself lucky. “I had a sort of liberating experience in having a lot of my stuff ruined. It was just stuff.”

Burke describes herself as a “spiritual mutt” not identified with any one religion, but adds, “I can’t imagine humankind going through something like this and surviving if there isn’t a higher power of some sort.”

When I ask the ten caseworkers clustered around the table about the spiritual repercussions of Katrina, their impressions are mixed.

“People either don’t question, they dig in their beliefs, or else they’re questioning everything,” says caseworker Jimmy Stuart. “I have a six-year-old boy and he’s prayed to God not to let another hurricane come. What do I tell him?”

For Cheniere Thomas, the hurricane led to spiritual renewal. “I’m not the perfect Christian, but when you’ve gone through something and you’re trying to cope, when you’re in the church, when you say, I’d rather have Jesus than silver and gold, you’re really saying it!”

Seth Tuengel sees a more sinister aspect to faith among the hurricane survivors with whom he works. “My perspective is that their faith has made people—I don’t want to say it this way—but complacent. People are being very fatalistic. There is an attitude that they can just wait to die. ‘I’ll meet my maker.’”

If there is one thing that everybody agrees on, it’s that things are bad, and they’re not getting better any time soon. In some ways, the team believes, the situation in New Orleans is even worse now than it was just after the flood.

“We’re at barebones survival level,” says Monica. “The initial shock has worn off. Now it’s the reality. The reality, quite frankly, sucks.”

Six months after the storm, housing costs have skyrocketed, most public schools are still closed, trash is piling up on roads and sidewalks, and frustration with FEMA and insurance red tape is about what you’d expect. Mardi Gras is over. Another hurricane season is on the way. Mold spores fill the air and “Katrina Cough” is epidemic—after a day or two, it seems strange to be in a public place and *not* hear somebody coughing or gasping for breath.

Add to this the perception that the rest of the country has largely shifted its attention away from New Orleans, and the knowledge that many sources of aid will soon run out. The team is bracing for a wave of hotel evictions on March 15, should the federal government finally carry through on its threat to cease paying for evacuees’ rooms.

“Ninety-eight percent of the stories are heartbreaking,” says Jimmy Stuart. “This is a hard job. It’s hard to keep these stories and keep some sense of hope.”

“We are the working wounded,” Catholic Charities president Gordon Wadge tells me in a later phone interview. “We are ministering to people and are ourselves affected...

my own home got flooded. My family's scattered across the region now, as far away as Missouri."

His accent is not typical Southern. The classic New Orleans accent is closer to what you hear in working-class Boston or Philly, with a handful of gravelly Katharine Hepburn vowels thrown in. It's evidence both of the waves of immigrants who settled in this port city, and of the city's paradoxical isolation from the surrounding region. Gordon's family has been in New Orleans for 150 years, his wife's family for 300 years. The more people I meet in New Orleans, the more I realize that this type of family history is not unusual.

Mary Daniels was my great-great-grandmother. I'm told she was beautiful, with dark curls and full red lips. We don't really know much more about her, except that she boarded a steamboat in New Orleans and asked for a ticket for "as far up the river as the boat would go." With her looks, she soon found a husband in St. Paul Minnesota, one who knew not to ask too many questions. Was she fleeing an abusive husband? A brothel? I like to imagine a scandalous, dramatic tale, but that's all speculation. I do wonder whether I had any cousins, black or white, living in the city when Katrina struck.

"Pre-Katrina we talked at Catholic Charities about how we care for the poor and vulnerable," Gordon continues. "Now the poor and vulnerable is a much wider group. If you're poor, you're used to living crisis to crisis. For the middle class, within 24 hours you're in a life-changing situation."

He does not see that change as entirely negative. "You go back to your core," he explains. "In New Orleans our center is our spirituality. People are searching and seeking that greater understanding of existence. I think that's what tragedies do."

Gordon spent time on the front lines of the disaster, working with medically frail evacuees at the Superdome during the first 48 hours of the emergency. He feels that the media overstated the violence there.

“The truth was it was just incredibly difficult living conditions,” he says. “[At one point] we staffed the lost children’s table. These people were coming in just shell-shocked, literally with just the clothes on their backs. You could tell by the water marks on the clothes how deep the water was. There was a real sense of concern about where people were.”

Says Gordon, “The number one thing you could do was just be present to people. There were no answers to give.”

Jim Kelly, CEO of Catholic Charities, also chose to stay and work in New Orleans rather than evacuate. After the storm had passed, he left the Superdome to accompany a caravan of 335 medically fragile senior citizens to Armstrong International Airport. Speaking on a static-filled cell phone, with only a few minutes to spare before he jumps into a meeting with the mayor, he quickly recalls events.

“We’d been turned away before at checkpoints, but this time we got through. When we got to the tarmac, we found out there were over 5,000 people at the airport. At the baggage claim, they were all elderly, as far as the eye can see. We loved them, we held them, we talked to them as we loaded them onto a [shuttle] bus.

“Afterward, I wandered through the security checkpoint upstairs at the gate. I pulled back the tarps, and there on the floor, on stretchers were 33 elderly too frail to make it. So I got down on my knees and prayed with them. I could see that this elderly woman’s name was Edna, from the name tags on her blankets.

“I told her that I loved her. I told her that God loved her. I told her that she had a wonderful, beautiful smile. I told her that God was going to take her home. I made the sign of the cross. Then Edna reached up, put her hands on my forehead, and blessed me back. I knew that Edna was blessing me, and I knew that God was blessing me.

“It was a grace-filled moment. That moment has carried me through the next few months.”

The cell phone static makes it sound like we are conversing at the bottom of the ocean. I get the feeling Jim has told this story many times before. If I were him, I would need to tell it too, need to reach for meaning, for signs of God’s presence in the face of pain and death. Edna’s loved ones would surely give thanks that she did not die alone

At this point, Jim has to go in for his meeting, but he calls my cell phone an hour later, to make sure that I have all the information I need. “This is an area of deep faith,” he tells me at the end our conversation. “We believe in Lent, but we also believe in Easter and resurrection. It’s all about God’s grace. God is going to see us through this.”

3. Riverbend

By this time, it’s Friday evening and I am scribbling down my last few notes while riding the St. Charles Avenue bus, seeking distraction ahead. In better times this would have been a streetcar line, but at least it runs. I don’t know why I thought it would be a good idea to take the bus line instead of my own car. I guess I’m still a little freaked about driving in this city, particularly at night, with traffic lights out and the occasional intersection blocked off with debris. Plus, in one of the city’s sporadic attempts to rebuild tourism, the fare is free.

I get off at Oak Street, past the Tulane and Loyola campuses. According to my pre-Katrina Lonely Planet Guide, Riverbend is supposed to be a hip neighborhood, full of nightclubs and funky boutiques. Some storefronts have reopened, but many more are vacant. The Maple Leaf Bar has a show tonight, but not for a few more hours. I float between the street's two open coffee shops for a while, debating whether to go back to the tourist-friendly French Quarter before it gets dark.

I decide to give the neighborhood one last try and head to the bar at Jacques-Imo's Cafe. The girl sitting next to me turns out to be from Massachusetts, although she's lived in New Orleans for two years, attending graduate school at the Tulane School of Public Health. She introduces me to her friends Joe and Karen, recent U Mass graduates who drove down to New Orleans to volunteer in the cleanup, and invites me to join them for dinner.

To my surprise, we all join hands for a moment of silence before eating. Soon we are gabbing away, fellow expatriates from the North swapping stories of our adventures here in Dixie. The blackened redfish, the cornbread, the fried green tomatoes with shrimp, are all superb, but there's more to our meal than food. With its painted screen porch and rickety tables, Jacques-Imo's is the first place I have been in New Orleans that feels crowded, noisy, and alive. Diners are young, multiracial, and as far as I can tell, mostly local. Do they come here to forget the pall of depression that hangs over their city, or are they immune?

After dinner, I wander around with Joe and Karen in search of live music, first at the Maple Leaf, then eventually ride with them across town to Donna's on Rampart Street.

While we're still standing around at the Maple Leaf, Joe talks about the Quaker meeting he attended last week. "The Spirit filled me," he says. "It was incredible. I can't even describe it. I knew that were all the same, that we were all part of something bigger than ourselves... I just started laughing."

Back in Massachusetts I might have asked Joe if he'd been tripping. But here it's different. People talk about these things, like they are just another part of life. Black folks and white folks, Protestant and Catholic, from all over the socioeconomic spectrum... you hear them reference their spirituality during public radio pledge drives, or in casual sidewalk conversations.

"This isn't America," Joe says and laughs as we're getting in their car.

He's right. This doesn't feel like part of the United States. Too few chains, too many coffee bars, and... oh yeah, the Third World living conditions. New Orleans has been described as North America's only magic realist city. I wonder, are poverty and despair preconditions for magic realism, or is that just one more exotic illusion that we outsiders project?

There is no air conditioning at Donna's and my beer is warm, but the music turns out to be incredible. It's like the humidity in the air has some extra power to conduct sound. I didn't even think I liked jazz, always thought of it as elevator music for the NPR set. But throw in horns, drums, and tuba, and you get a totally different sound—sassy, insouciant, larger than life.

The Treme Street Brass Band plays old standards ("Mack the Knife," "What a Wonderful World") as well as original compositions. "I lost my PlayStation II," the

singer laments in one tragicomic song about Katrina. A middle-aged African-American couple dances next to the stage, twirling a miniature sparkly parasol between them.

Along with the familiar themes of love and bad behavior, the set contains a fair amount of Gospel—"Walking with the King," "I'll Fly Away," and of course, "When the Saints Go Marching In." On Sunday, I will hear many of the same tunes at St. Augustine Catholic Church a few blocks away. People will be dancing there, too.

4. Metairie

The next day I drive out to Metairie, where Cheniere Thomas has invited me to attend the youth concert in which her daughter is singing. Cheniere is tall and broad-shouldered with long braids, stylish glasses in heavy frames, and a fondness for the color turquoise. Friday was her last day as a Catholic Charities social worker; she is about to resume her previous career as a physical education teacher at a newly opened charter school.

Cheniere has an extraordinarily calm demeanor, which must be useful in both lines of work. Friday morning, when she saw me getting flustered and anxious, trying to take down directions, she touched my arm and said, "Just call me."

For her, Katrina's greatest hardship has been family members scattered far away. She recounts the task of enlarging a wallet shot to replace a framed photograph of her Aunt Della May's son and daughter, which had been ruined by the flood. Both children, now adults, moved to Texas and have no plans to move back. Because Cheniere and her husband's home was not severely damaged in the storm, it has become the new seat of family gatherings.

Not everyone in this community escaped so lightly.

Nineveh Baptist Church sits on the far western edge of the suburb of Metairie, about a mile from the airport in Kenner, in a mostly industrial neighborhood. Inside, about 40 kids are on stage, dressed in white, ranging in age from five or six all the way into their teens. Family members are scattered through the pews. It's not a huge crowd, but then again, it is 3 PM on a Saturday. I was expecting to be the only white person here, but in fact there is also a photographer snapping pictures for the Faith section of the Times-Picayune.

It's a long service (almost two hours) and an emotional one. The audience sways and claps to the music, and in between songs, speakers get up and offer personal testimonies. When one woman starts shouting, crying, and waving her arms from the pulpit, everyone rushes to the front for a group prayer. I slowly piece together that a boy in his teens was murdered the night before—someone from the neighborhood, someone many choir members knew.

“This area and the area where I live have always been considered a suburb of New Orleans, but now that New Orleans is basically shut down, we're becoming the city. And that's driving everything that's related,” school counselor Jerry Smith tells me after the service. “We were in prayer service on Thursday night and while we were sitting in prayer service we heard gunshots.”

In part, Jerry attributes the violence threatening her community to a generational shift in values. “Our culture, our heritage is in the church. We have been an oppressed people, we have lived without, but we always thank God. And now as we become more educated, as we have more equality—and I thank God for that—but it's almost as though

we've replaced God with things and education," she says. "I really look at the peril of our people, and I would have to say, it's because we are no longer raising our children in God."

Says Jerry, "I know that it's the grace of God that kept me and my family and my friends and loved ones safe." When the decision came about whether to evacuate, she recalls, "I really felt the Holy Spirit saying you need to get your child, talk to your husband, you need to go."

Why was she spared when so many others lost far more? Jerry's answer is simple. "I believe that when God blesses us he wants us to bless others."

Choir director Patrick Chatman tells me that Nineveh Baptist Church opened up a food bank from October through December, offering food, clothes, water, and Bibles. The church has also offered workshops teaching parishioners how to file insurance claims. Nineveh is also providing worship space to churches whose buildings are not yet usable, without charge. Says Chatman, "We're here to help. We're not here to make a profit."

Sister Sherrilon Thomas first caught my attention when she stood up and spoke during the service. A petite woman in her late 30s, wearing a brown suit with white t-shirt, her voice filled up the room. "God has smiled on me. He has set me free," she testified. "The water was up to my head. I am still here for a reason."

I ask Cheniere to introduce us after the service. She and Sherrilon turn out to be good friend. They laugh about everything they have in common—both have daughters of the same age (also good friends) and both are married to men with the last name "Thomas."

Sherrilon works at the cafeteria at Rudolph Matas Elementary School in Metairie, but her passion lies elsewhere. As youth director for Nineveh Baptist Church, she collaborates with other churches, bringing children and teens together for concerts, workshops, and overnight trips to amusement parks and museums.

“Last year we had about eleven churches,” she remembers. “There was no standing room up there or anything. But this year I guess due to the hurricane our numbers are less. A lot of people are all spread out, so they weren’t able to come back and participate.”

Despite these obstacles, Sherrilon remains committed to her mission. “It may not be that many youth, but you’ve got to take the few that you have and work with them.”

Because of her mother’s recent surgery, Sherrilon was staying with family near Canal Street when the hurricane hit. “Monday evening, we were able to step out and the water was at the second or third step. We didn’t think nothing of it, but then we woke up in the middle of the night... and the water was at my ankle. When daylight came, the water was rising so fast it came midway up my leg. That’s when we decided that we needed to get out of the house.

Her niece had just given birth, so to avoid contamination from the water, the family carried mother and baby out on top of a door they had salvaged from the floodwaters. After reaching Canal, they stayed for several hours in an old police building, then headed for the bus station, where they were turned away.

“Somebody said they were going to have some buses at the bridge waiting for us. But we got to the bridge and there were no buses. And when we tried to walk across that

bridge, they wouldn't allow us to cross the bridge. They said it was dangerous. They had policeman and dogs," Sherrilon recalls.

"We stayed there and after about 30 minutes, they came back and said they were going to send buses. So everybody started clapping and smiling, and you could see the smiles on the faces, because we knew West Bank was the only place to go, the only dry land."

However, when they reached the other side of the Crescent City Connection, the welcome was hardly warm. "We had to get off of those buses and wait on more buses to come, but when those buses came, they told us that we [each] had to pay \$15. And of course, me and my family, all we had all together was \$80," she explains. They stayed with friends that lived on the West Bank for two days, but their house had no food or water.

"We was one of the ones that had to go into a store. Looters?" she laughs ruefully. "We looted, but the only thing we got out of that store was water and Gatorade, stuff like that. What made us do that was we were down to the very little water that was left in the bottle. So we saved that for the baby, because the baby was newborn. For the next two days, all we did was drink Gatorade. We left the water for the newborn baby."

On Thursday they walked back to the mall on the expressway. "We had to wait there in a long line," she says. "It looked like Mardi Gras day, there was so many people out there. And food! We finally got to see food. It was just food that people had, and they were sharing the food. There was this gumbo like we hadn't eaten in days... we stood there for about four to five hours before we actually got up to the bus line and waited our turn."

After the bus dropped them off in Metairie, Sherrilon's husband walked back to their house and retrieved their one remaining vehicle. (The other car had been lost when Canal Street flooded.) The family rushed back to the house, packed in darkness, and headed for Baton Rouge.

"For me, myself, personally, I never ever prayed so hard," says Sherrilon. "I never dreamed that I would be out there in all that water.... I don't know how to swim. One of the girls that was at the house with us, I was able to wade on her back, and she brought me up to Canal where I could walk in the water. When that water was up to here, no way could I have walked in! So I thank God for her being there."

"I give God all the glory," she says. "Because if it wasn't for Him, I know I would have never ever survived what all I went through. I know I wouldn't have."

I say goodbye to Cheniere and Sherrilon and head back along Airline Highway to the New Orleans Arena downtown, where Billy and Franklin Graham will be holding a revival tonight. On the way I pass a convoy of St. Patrick's Day parade floats, giant heads and green glitter unearthly in the gathering dusk.

Parking for the event is beneath the still-ruined Superdome. The garage levels show no visible damage, but we have to walk right past the main dome to get to the arena. Lit from below, glowing faintly orange, the structure has an aura of futuristic menace, like a nuclear reactor or an alien spacecraft.

I have read that the arena holds 16,000 people. It's got to be at least 80 percent full. The crowd is mostly young and white. Some are among the thousands of volunteers working with mission groups to rebuild the Gulf Coast over Spring Break.¹ There is a

special level set aside for wheelchairs, and a translator uses American Sign Language on a video screen.

I had been chatting with a nice young mom and her daughter on the walk over. She told me they'd be sitting in Section 107 before we got separated at security. I look around without finding them, and end up sitting between a group of college students and another young mom, who is totally occupied with policing the behavior of her squirmy, restless four-year-old girl.

The two-hour "Celebration of Hope" is exquisitely choreographed, with very few breaks in between Christian music acts and inspirational speakers. I find out that the young man next to me is a volunteer from Pennsylvania, working on roofing projects in Gulfport, Mississippi, but that's about all that I can learn before the programming resumes at deafening volume. By this point the mom on my other side has managed to obtain some cheesy nachos, which temporarily occupy her child's attention.

Among the performers, we get Dennis Aganjanian, a Christian country star who wears a black hat and sings of Jesus' outlaw past, and Point of Grace, who resemble the less-good Dixie Chicks. The only New Orleans musician on the lineup is American Idol finalist George Huff.

"Let's turn the City That Care Forgot into the city that *cares for God!*" one speaker exhorts. There is an opening clip of St. Bernard Parish police officer who thanks God for saving his life, and another from an NFL player with ties to the city. On the whole, though, I am struck by the lack of connection to place—this could be any sporting arena, in any American city.

We are informed that Billy Graham is in the audience but will not be speaking tonight. Instead his son and heir apparent, Franklin Graham, will be giving the sermon. Silver-haired and in his 50s, Franklin is the president of worldwide evangelical relief and evangelical organization Samaritan's Purse. The organization has raised \$38 million for hurricane victims and has helped repair homes for 7,700 families in five states.¹ He is known for speaking out on numerous political issues from which his father stayed aloof (in particular, for his public criticism of Islam). All the same, I am surprised by the tack he takes.

"If there's one thing we can be thankful for tonight, it's a bloodstained cross," he begins, then moves into the kind of apocalyptic talk I would expect from Pat Robertson.

"Are we coming to the end of the age?" Franklin Graham asks. He cites Scripture about "wars and rumors of wars," speaks of AIDS and the threat of bird flu.

"Many people have asked, was the hurricane God's judgment? I think that's an honest question," Franklin Graham declares. His solution is to blame the devil. "He wants to destroy your life. He wants to destroy your soul."

In the end, tonight's vision of salvation and damnation is not collective, but intensely personal. It's all leading up to a climactic altar call, a personal appeal to accept Christ as Savior and receive eternal life.

"Mohammed didn't die for your sins, Buddha didn't die for your sins," Franklin Graham shouts, to huge applause. The young mother next to me slaps her daughter, who is getting fidgety. She starts to cry.

"No one can choose Christ for you," he implores. "If you're still not 100 percent sure that you're saved, come!"

People begin to file forward towards the stage, at first just a few, then hundreds. Soon they cover the arena floor. Signs in different languages direct non-English speakers to their designated areas for prayer. (Meanwhile, a smaller line has formed, of people leaving in the opposite direction. The unhappy mother and child join this line.)

“Some people think you can only talk to God in a church, with candles burning,” Franklin Graham remarks when all this is over, just before leaving the stage, in a barely veiled jab at Catholicism. Evangelical Protestants object to what they perceive as barriers that the Catholic Church places between believers and God: priesthood, the doctrine of salvation through works as well as grace, and an overemphasis on ritual in worship.

But I am struck by the ritual element of what happened here tonight—the concern that unless a person is in the right place at the right time, saying just the right words, salvation might not “take.” Some of the basic concepts of Christianity—the bloodstained cross, the theology of substitution and atonement—are pretty ritualistic at the core.

I didn’t spend much time looking into voodoo while I was in New Orleans. I saw fortune tellers’ booths outside St. Louis Cathedral and once accidentally wandered into a mystical apothecary shop in the French Quarter. (I thought they were selling perfume!) That was about all. I’m no expert on blood sacrifice. But I can tell you that there is nothing rational about the idea that our salvation was bought with the blood of one man two thousand years ago. This is something primal, something old and deep and powerful.

We require an exchange, Christ’s death in place of ours. We require ceremonies and prayers, altar call and the rite of Communion. And even after we fulfill our part of the bargain, there is still always a sliver of doubt. Why is it so hard to convince ourselves that we stand in God’s chosen circle, protected from the devil and the storm?

5. Treme

After yesterday's five hours of church, the prospect of another service this morning does not thrill me. Still, Jazz Mass at Saint Augustine Catholic Church is not to be missed. Up in front the Marsalis family is playing saxophone, trombone, and piano, but their presence is almost incidental. Today may be the final Sunday for the oldest African-American Catholic parish in the country. People are crowding into the pews to say goodbye, or else to stay and fight.

"All my children were baptized here. My son is buried here," says 78-year-old, silver-haired Mary Ann, who is sitting next to me.

"Before we integrated, we had to sit in the back three rows. All the whites would go up to communion first," her friend adds. That was during the Jim Crow era, when the majority of the congregation was made up of Italian immigrants. Before the Civil War, in Mary Ann's grandmother's time, the church was far more integrated. After its founding in 1842, whites and free blacks in the area began competing to buy up pews. Free people of color won the rivalry, even reserving the side aisles so that slaves attending services would have a place to sit.

The Treme neighborhood is nearly as old as the French Quarter on which it borders, although considerably poorer. The community formed in the late 1700s, when Claude Treme and Julie Moreau subdivided their plantation and sold lots to all takers, creating a haven for free people of color fleeing the bloody Haitian Revolution. The district is steeped in African-American history and heritage, and St. Augustine is its spiritual heart. Jazz funerals leave from the front steps of the church, and on festival days,

Mardi Gras Indians march from its doors to Congo Square. It hosts drum circles in the parish hall and an annual festival known as Satchmo, in honor of Louis Armstrong's birthday. Rapper Master P once rented out the parish hall for his father's birthday party.¹ But in recent years, St. Augustine's official membership has declined, as Treme experienced gentrification and a shrinking population of black Catholics.

During Katrina, the church sheltered neighborhood residents from the worst of the flooding. While it suffered external damage to its roof and copper bell tower, St. Augustine was one of the first Catholic churches in the area to reopen its doors. Following the hurricane, it became a center for distribution of clothes, toys, and information. Its food pantry was serving 100 families a day.

Nevertheless, facing millions of dollars in uninsured Katrina-related losses, the Archdiocese of New Orleans accelerated plans to merge the parish with St. Peter Claver, an 8,000-member African-American parish outside the core of Treme. Members were given just over a month's notice of the decision. While the archdiocese promises to keep the historic sanctuary building open for weekly Mass, beloved priest Jerome LeDoux would be dismissed, and members would lose control over finances and missions.

This morning the sanctuary is packed with a mixture of black and white worshippers. Parish council president and retired school system employee Sandra Gordon claims that membership (now at about 350 families) has been growing ever since the hurricane, including many worshippers whose home churches have yet to reopen.

It sure seems like a vibrant place. There are two baptisms today, a ten-minute exchange of the Peace, and a gospel choir singing "This Little Light of Mine," "We Are Standing on Holy Ground," "I'll Fly Away," and "When the Saints Go Marching In." I

had been expecting something more like a formal jazz concert, but Branford, Delfeayo, and Ellis Marsalis blend right into the church band. At the end of the service, the little old ladies are dancing in the aisles.

It's impossible to believe that this parish could end in three days. The place feels so *alive*. I can see heaven being a lot like this—black folks and white folks joining hands, joyful, music just bubbling forth. I spot Joe and Karen up in front and wave hello, doing my best to avoid the sight lines of a Swiss documentary team who is busy filming the musicians.

The mood builds steadily as the service continues, to an almost festival intensity. This is an unexpected for Lent, not to mention a parish facing imminent doom, yet it seems somehow fitting. There is no explicit mention of the conflict during the service, but it is clear that church members are not giving up. An appeal to the Archbishop is underway, and they expect to have their answer within a day's time.

"A parish is family. We have generations here—not just one, two generations. Six or seven generations," Sandra Gordon proclaims after worship is over and the music has finally died down. As people begin to leave she announces a parish meeting on Monday evening and urges everyone to buy the church's fundraising T-shirts.

I slip outside and join the line of reporters waiting to talk to Father Jerome LeDoux, in between a writer from the L.A. Times and another from the Associated Press. The story has already attracted national media attention and why wouldn't it? It's colorful, picturesque, and it fits well into the post-Mardi Gras wave of New Orleans stories.

The priest explains that he needs to take time to say goodbye to members of his flock before answering our questions, so we wait as old folks and children come up to hug him and take their pictures with him. Jerome LeDoux is a member of the Society of the Divine Word, the first Catholic order to ordain black men as priests in the United States. At age 76, he attributes his continued health to his vegan diet. Clad in a pale blue dashiki, with his white curly hair and slight frame, he looks the part of a holy man.

But this particular holy man has taken an active, even radical stance on worldly matters. Back in 1970 the priest worked to broker a deal between police and the Black Panthers during their showdown at the Desire Housing Project.¹ In recent years, the priest has opened the parish hall to neighborhood groups organizing against police brutality and publicly chastised FEMA and the New Orleans municipal government for their inept post-hurricane response. A parishioner asks the priest to pose with a poster board covered with clippings of his many columns and articles; it takes two people to hold up the display.

“St. Augustine is the first truly multiethnic church in New Orleans,” he says. “We want to reach out to everyone, no exceptions. This is a grassroots parish. The people who come here are grassroots people.”

He has served in this parish for 15 years and is working on a historical novel about the church’s early years. He feels that it would be particularly tragic to close the parish down now, just as it is returning to the ethnic diversity of its founding.

Earlier this morning he told the church that God was everywhere—in the wind, the rain, the fire, and the water—but most of all, God was in us. We were God’s own dwelling places, “more precious than that tabernacle up there.”

“The seat on which you are sitting is a holy seat,” he said. “The floor on which your feet are resting is holy ground. We are standing on holy ground, every one of us.”

I ask him if he could feel God’s presence while he was preaching today.

“How could you not feel it?” Father Jerome LeDoux responds. “From the beginning, before I even started talking, I could see the people looking up and smiling. When I walked in, the spirit of God was heavily invested here.”

Sandra Gordon has emphasized that the priest is not the main reason the parish is fighting closure. They know that he is getting on in years and eventually will retire. Still, it is hard to imagine anyone who could replace him.

Just as I’m leaving, a band of motorcycles comes roaring down the street, led by a youth on a white horse. “Oh, they’re doing a second line,” I hear somebody say behind me.

I am confused. I had thought that the second line was part of the classic jazz funeral.

“You can have a second line at a funeral. The first line is the family, the second line is your friends and the band,” explains a woman in African dress and braids who introduces herself as Naiama. She evacuated to Atlanta but is back in New Orleans for this Sunday only.

“But we have them just for fun too. It’s what you do on the weekends, just to play.”

All through the next two days, as I conduct more interviews, buy pralines and Cafe du Monde coffee for friends and family, and try doggedly to set up an interview with Father Michael Jacques at St. Peter Claver parish, I can’t get the church and its

people out of my mind. This just seems like kicking folks when they're down, taking away the one thing they knew they could depend on in the months after Katrina.

I know that there are two sides to every story. According to archdiocesan spokesperson Father William Maestri, the decision is not just about money—parishioners will have far better access to religious education and social service offerings as part of St. Peter Claver.¹ The Catholic Church has an excellent reputation in New Orleans, particularly compared to the legendary corruption of the city government and public schools. The archdiocese has educated entire generations of Catholics and non-Catholics alike. Through public and private partnerships, the church plans to rebuild and restore 7,000 units of affordable housing over the next five years.¹ The Catholic Church provides moral leadership in New Orleans, far more so than in most American cities.

I cannot understand what the archdiocese is doing here. Granted, I have only attended one Sunday service, but this seems like exactly the kind of community one would strive to preserve at any cost. Particularly since according to the parish council, finances are not actually all that bad. Sandra Gordon claims that the parish is now financial self-sufficient and that a local businessman has pledged to raise \$1 million to pay off its long-term debt. Among parishioners, speculation about the true motive for the takeover is running wild; the most popular theories are that the archdiocese hopes to sell St. Augustine's valuable real estate once the neighborhood gentrifies, and that this is basically an ego booster for Father Michael Jacques, who "wants to be the Pope of Treme."

The mood is much darker at the meeting on Monday night. Church members have learned that their appeal to Archbishop Hughes has been rejected—learned this, not from

a personal response, but from a story in the newspaper. In fact, according to the article, members were never really participating in an appeals process, only a “listening session.” The 50 or so people occupying folding chairs in the parish basement are hurt, angry, shocked. They had truly expected to win today.

Sandra hands out a press release, but after that, they want the media to leave. First they ask the video cameras to go, and then all of us scribblers as well. We all stand around in the church parking lot for a while, unsure of where the story will go next. There is some anger at the parishioners for excluding us, and a general feeling that it was counterproductive on their part. That may be true, but I understand their reasoning, understand why a community would need to grieve for a little while in private.

A van full of young people pulls up, and they begin to unload sleeping bags and pillows into the church sanctuary. They are college students on Spring Break, one of the documentary makers tells me, sleeping at St. Augustine while they work on service projects in the surrounding neighborhoods. Nothing to do with the story we’re following.

I am supposed to leave town the next morning. The check-out slip is under my door at the Sheraton when I wake up. No charge for the room, and they’ve even agreed to waive the hotel parking fees. Man, is this city desperate for press coverage that will bring the tourists back!

Less than 24 hours from now, on Wednesday, March 15, 2006, St. Augustine Parish will officially cease to exist. I hate to leave things this way, but I don’t know what else to do. There is no mention of the story in today’s paper and Sandra Gordon is not answering her cell phone. Why didn’t I stick around longer last night, until after the

meeting ended, to find out the next phase in the parishioners' strategy (if they even have one)?

At least, after numerous phone calls to the Archdiocese public relations office, I have managed to set up one interview on the other side, with Father Michael Jacques, pastor of St. Peter Claver, for 10:30 AM Tuesday morning. I arrive a few minutes early, so I wait. And then I wait some more. The priest is in a meeting, the secretary tells me. He will see me after he gets out. This carpeted office with fake wood paneling must have experienced some mold damage, because my allergies are as bad as they've been any time on this trip. As I rummage for a cough drop, I'm just as glad I don't have to speak to anyone just yet.

I have no idea what the area around St. Peter Claver looked like before Katrina, but right now it makes Treme look like Disneyworld. It's not the patchwork you get with wind damage. Here, every home is destroyed... sagging, gutted buildings, marked with search and rescue graffiti on the corners. I am a little concerned about having all my luggage visible in the rear of my hatchback car, but the streets seem too empty even for crime.

Half an hour goes by, then an hour. I learn about the church's patron saint: a white Jesuit priest born in the 16th century who baptized and ministered to slaves arriving in South America. I read an article in a church magazine by none other than Father Jerome LeDoux himself, entitled "Do Blacks Still Have a Dream?"

I ask the secretary again if Father Jacques will be able to keep our appointment. She says she does not know. Would I like to reschedule? I explain that I am on my way

out of town. When we reach the two-hour mark, she tells me that she is sorry, but the priest has another meeting scheduled, so he won't be available for an interview today.

Father Michael Jacques calls me back at the end of the week and apologizes. We chat for a while about the difficulties of leading a large parish after Katrina, locating displaced members, holding funeral services for those who never made it home. But when I bring up the subject of St. Augustine, he quickly grows defensive—accuses me of tricking him into the interview and refuses to answer any further questions. It is only from his accent that I begin to suspect what no news account has so far disclosed. A quick Internet photo search confirms my hunch: unlike his entire congregation and staff, Michael Jacques is white. Maybe the reporters just didn't know (after all, both LeDoux and Jacques are French surnames) or maybe they just didn't want to make a big deal about race. Given the history of this particular parish, though, it seems like a pretty big elephant in the room to be ignored.

As it turns out, I'm not quite done in New Orleans yet. Driving over to St. Peter Claver, I was listening to community radio station WWOZ when in between jazz sets, someone started talking about a rally and concert at St. Augustine Catholic Church. Looks like it's happening at 2 PM this afternoon, outside the main entrance at the Tomb of the Unknown Slave. I don't know whether to thank God for this stroke of luck, or kick myself for not being a better journalist and having to rely on luck. Anyway, it's enough to go on for now.

Turns out there is no concert at the afternoon rally, but the energy here is still high. People are crowded six, seven deep on the sidewalk, chanting and waving signs.

Many appear to be the college students we saw the night before. Every so often, they start to sing and chant. “We shall not be moved,” goes the simple refrain. “Like a tree standing by the water, we shall not be moved.” It’s a protest song I will hear many times over the next few hours.

Toward the front, Sandra Gordon and several of the oldest ladies of the parish answer reporters’ questions. They announce the beginning of a ten-hour prayer vigil, lasting from now until midnight, when the parish is scheduled to change hands. Father LeDoux is nowhere to be seen. Rumor has it that he has moved out of the rectory and is under a gag order not to speak about the conflict—even to members of his own parish.

A man in a leather motorcycle jacket holds up a banner bearing the words of Pope John Paul II on his 1987 visit to New Orleans. “All churches should be like Saint Augustine,” it reads.

“If this was happening in 1954, I wouldn’t be surprised,” says parishioner Bob French. “But this is 2006. I’ve gone through all that. The drinking fountains... I played music, and I had to go through the back door of the club.”

John Boutte agrees. “I’m one of the free people of black New Orleans. We’ve been here seven generations. It’s kind of like a slap in our face and a kick in our ass.” He defines Treme as the neighborhood bounded by Claiborne, Rampart, Esplanade, and Orleans. “[St. Peter Claver] is not the Treme,” he says. “Outside, the heart feel is different. You don’t have that family.”

John lists his occupation as “artist, musician, poet, and sometimes I prophesy.” He is a frequent participant in Jazz Masses. After our conversation is over, I see him turn to

a friend in the crowd to announce an upcoming gig: “Saturday night. DBA, Frenchman Street. Be there.”

Inside the sanctuary, the prayer vigil is an oasis of peace and calm. Jazz guitar plays softly, as members bow their heads and clasp their hands. Sunlight slanting through the stained glass window gives the scene the quality of an old master painting—timeless, faintly glowing. I know I should go out and get some more quotes, but I don’t want to leave.

“On this holy ground the Holy Spirit touches you, and you don’t leave the same,” Marlene Charleston tells me just outside the door. I ask her what the parish plans to do when they formally lose control of the property at midnight. Will they accept the authority of the archdiocese? Will there be some form of civil disobedience?

“God is in control,” she tells me, and gives no further answer.

I will need to leave soon if I am going to get to Montgomery tonight, or even Mobile. The road through Mississippi was dodgy enough that I don’t relish driving it in the dark.

I recognize one of the members of the documentary team walking away from the church. She is the only woman on the crew, and the only one from Louisiana. When I ask her if she has heard anything more about further protest plans or the parishioners’ long-term strategy, she laughs. “I’m learning that in this city you can’t make plans very well,” she tells me. “You just sort of have to go with the flow.”

Flow. The Mississippi flows through this city—widest, longest river on the continent, lazy in some places, swift in others. It shifts and curves back on itself, and sometimes it cuts a new channel.

Flow. Canals overwhelmed, pumps abandoned, flood waters rushing in.

Flow. God in the water, God in the waves. These words have stayed with me, but I'm still not sure what they mean. Is it possible to find God in senseless chaos without sounding insane, or cruel, or both?

So much is at stake for these parishioners and they are running out of time. They don't seem to have any clear plan. Instead they just shrug and say, "It's up to God."

It seems crazy, putting that much faith in God. More to the point, it seems like an excuse for passivity. That's exactly what that outreach workers at Catholic Charities was complaining about. How can you accept responsibility for an outcome if it's in God's hands? Why work to change your situation if it is just God's will?

Still, the folks at St. Augustine's don't seem exactly passive. Maybe their confidence is not misplaced. Maybe I could even learn something from them.

So many things have gone wrong on this trip, and so many things have gone right. I wouldn't even be here if not for 30 seconds on the radio, just an hour before I was supposed to head out of town. I don't want to read too much into coincidences, but I am trying to trust that God is leading me. I think I need to stay for one more day.

The hostel where I end up spending the night is a stark contrast to the sleek mahogany furniture and complimentary bathrobes of the Sheraton. The room is actually kind of beautiful, with high ceilings, old brick walls, and a tall balcony window, but the air is barely breathable. Definitely mold contamination. I wonder if the lower level got flooded.

In search of allergy medicine, I head to a Walgreens further down Magazine Street, but the section is stripped bare. Every cold remedy aside from Ny-Quill is sold out. Either there is a crystal meth lab in the vicinity, or an awful lot of people are experiencing the same conditions as me, with no checkout date in sight.

I finally manage to reach Sandra Gordon on her cell phone, and she tells me to come back at 10 PM for a candlelight vigil outside the church. I arrive on schedule. About 100 people are here, many college students among them. Church bells are tolling. A young Asian man and a white woman with curly brown hair play what appear to be traditional African instruments: a long wooden bow with a string and a round wooden gourd attached. Candles are lit and we all file inside. I notice that the Swiss documentary team found out about the vigil as well. One by one, people come up to the purple-draped cypress stump pulpit to speak.

“Let us remember the slaves and free people of color who built this place,” says the first speaker, a bearded, middle-aged white man. “We remember them. We ask their presence.”

The second speaker is a woman, also white. She calls on the Intercession of Mary and leads the group through the Hail Mary prayer three times.

A black man of late middle years walks up to the pulpit, dressed in dark proletarian clothes. I don't yet know his name or his place in history—his time as a Freedom Rider, his friends murdered by the Klan. But I am moved by the power of his words.

“One day, in the jails of Mississippi,” he recalls, “It occurred to me that the message of the cross was not isolated into a single moment in history. In order for us to salvage the indignities before us, we must put ourselves up...”

“In the civil rights movement, we came with a prayer of action, we came with a prayer of love,” he tells us. He speaks of sacrificial love and the suffering of innocents, the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. and the four little girls killed by a bomb in a Birmingham church. He tells of his grandson, who has been playing the tuba since he was four years old. Since evacuating away from New Orleans, he has stopped playing music.

He closes by telling us, “If you’re going to be true to life, you must stand against Rome,” then walks toward the back of the church. It’s not a preacher’s fiery exhortation, just a matter-of-fact statement. He sounds a little weary, a little bemused. These are the words of someone who has been standing up to Rome all his life, and every now and then the strain has got to show.

The students have begun to sing “Amazing Grace.”

I realize that I have got to talk to this man some more. His name is Jerome Smith, I soon learn from the people sitting nearby in the pews. Better talk to him soon, they say, because he looked like he was maybe about to leave.

I find him just outside the church doors, pacing back and forth on the darkened sidewalk. He explains that he can’t do an interview now because he’s expecting a call to move a kid to a safe house. But he takes down my information and says he will call tomorrow morning.

We talk for a little while longer while Jerome waits. “Folks are still trying to recover. They need these way stations of prayer. What we’re seeing is the inability of the Catholic Church to provide for these neighborhoods,” he says.

“We stayed in here during the hurricane,” he says, gesturing at the church. “The boys with big pants went out into the water, they brought back food and diapers from Winn-Dixie. They were heroes, just as much as those teenagers in Birmingham in front of the fire hoses. You put your life up to save someone else. The message of deliverance is the same now as then.”

He says the Holy Spirit was his source of strength during and after the civil rights movement. When he calls it the “voice of no sound,” I feel a shock of recognition.

Back inside the church, a blonde woman with a heavy Swedish accent asks us to visualize Father LeDoux, riding his donkey down the aisle for Palm Sunday four weeks from now.

A woman in a bright pink shirt gets up and announces that she learned this afternoon that Father LeDoux has been asked to celebrate Mass for one final Sunday. “We’ve been fasting and praying. Things have been opening up for us,” she says. “[God] may not come when we want him, but he always He always comes right on time.”

The two students begin playing their tribal instruments. After a few minutes, one of the parishioners starts to sing along in an African language. The crowd haltingly repeats the refrain.

There is a tranquility to a prayer vigil absent from most other forms of protest. We have a place to sit. Times of speech are interspersed with silence. The space feels

sheltering, protective. I realize that this was literally a place of refuge where people took shelter from the storm.

A young African-American woman sings “Let It Be,” accompanied by violin and guitar. I cannot believe how loudly and clearly the unamplified sound echoes through the space.

“The first time I came here, I knew this was my home,” says a short, middle-aged woman wearing a Spirit Riders of New Orleans motorcycle jacket. “I lost my mother, I lost my father... my family from St. Augustine has helped me through.”

An older, bearded man gets up and asks everyone to get on their knees. “Please, keep our church alive,” he prays with tears in eyes, as the congregation kneels in the darkened sanctuary. “I believe in this church.”

A white man in his twenties with wild corkscrew curls is the next to speak. He introduces himself as a musician who grew up in the French Quarter. His bass teacher lived in Treme, so he would come to the neighborhood for music lessons. He and his wife Sarah started coming to St. Augustine after Carnival Day, he says, and have introduced at least five new members. Sarah is fashionably dressed, wearing a bold scarf that would scream “society lady” if she were just a few years older.

“I’m not from here,” she confesses. “I do yoga and I’ve always tried to be a pretty spiritual person. In New Orleans, it’s just easier... at church last Sunday I felt this thing for the first time—that everybody is one.”

At the stroke of midnight, people start clapping, dancing, and singing, “We Shall Not Be Moved.” Next, a young man gets up and introduces himself as Billy from Howard University, the “Voice of the Students.” He explains that the college students have met as

a group and decided to support the parish in its fight against closure. A smaller group is willing to engage in civil disobedience.

“This church is a pillar of hope in this community,” says Billy. “We have students who have declared their willingness to remain inside and be jailed—whatever it takes. That is, if you all want us here.”

No formal vote is taken, but the crowd murmurs its assent.

I find out that Billy’s last name is Almo and that he’s from a military family in lower Maryland. He’s not Catholic, “just Christian.” What got him involved in this fight, he says, was seeing how racism contributed to the destruction of the hurricanes. “The levees would be different in the poorer black neighborhoods than in the white ones,” he recalls.

A woman with short, bleached hair and glasses walks up to the students and I overhear excited talk about attorneys, judges, and getting together a list of phone numbers. Her name is Carol Kolincak and she’s a criminal defense attorney.

“We’re really feeling like it’s the birth of a movement,” she tells me. “So many of our members were involved in the civil rights movement. This feels like a passing of the torch.”

On Wednesday morning, Jerome Smith calls me up. I ask him if the kid got to the safe house all right, and he says yes, although it took all night and he hasn’t slept yet.

“At my age, you need less sleep,” he says and laughs. We agree to meet at CC’s Coffee House, at the intersection of Magazine Street and Jefferson Avenue.

Jerome is 66 years old. He wears a plaid work shirt and a black knit skullcap, but it's his gaze that you notice right away. His eyes are warm, brown, and twinkling. It feels difficult, even uncomfortable, to break away from them.

"Everything I do is an extension of the civil rights movement," he tells me. Since 1968, he has been running a youth organization called Tamborine & Fan.

"We deal with cultural exposure that's unique to New Orleans, namely the music popularized by Louis Armstrong, and the indigenous culture of the Mardi Gras Indian, which is really African ritual using American Indian motifs. All those things are like magic to youngsters. We organize around social things out of that," he explains. "It's an extension of the old Mississippi Freedom Schools."

Jerome and three other students from his high school were among the original Freedom Riders, going from Montgomery, Alabama to Jackson, Mississippi. Only later, when I go home and do some research, do I learn that Jerome was beaten so badly on that trip that he nearly died. As an activist for the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), he delivered the blue Ford station wagon in which civil rights workers James Earl Chaney, Michael Goodman, and Andrew Schwerner would later be murdered. In 1963, he was invited to the White House alongside James Baldwin, Harry Belafonte, and Lena Horne, where he called out Bobby Kennedy in no uncertain terms, pushing the administration to take a stronger stance on civil rights.

"He would have been the greatest American president," Jerome believes, "because he had a sense of tragedy. He would have made a tremendous difference."

His attitude toward George W. Bush is far different. “The most sinister person in the country that speaks to Christianity is the president,” he says. “You cannot kill the innocent.”

Indeed, Jerome is sharply critical of much organized religion.

“You tend to lean on certain dogmas that can compromise you,” he maintains. “You meet God in your mama’s womb. When you embrace life, that’s God.”

When he was growing up, he went to church at St. Peter Claver with his mother. “But around the corner the church was segregated, and no one in the church spoke to that,” says Jerome. “They were not Christians. They surrendered to the social dictates. They did not rise above it.”

In today’s New Orleans, he sees a parallel situation. “Most all of the black kids in this city don’t have schools to go to. That’s a sin—and none of the major white religious institutions will speak against it,” he says. I recall that his grandson is one of these exiled children.

“What we call church is so limited in terms of sustaining a movement that’s about deliverance and enhancement of human conditions that it’s embarrassing,” he continues.

But what sounds at times like pessimism is tempered by experience and patience. “The spiritual clock is different than man’s clock,” he adds. “It’s a long struggle.”

Back in the 1960s, at the height of the civil rights movement, says Jerome, “the church was very essential. It was a refuge. You’d sleep in the pews and under the pews. It was a network, almost like the underground.”

One night in Canton, Mississippi, the house where he and other organizers were staying was sprayed with bullets. “It was so strange that no one was hit,” he tells me.

“These elderly ladies, every now and then, they would stop you on the street and say a prayer. They’d say you need not worry, you was wrapped in prayer.”

At the age of eleven, Jerome boarded a New Orleans city bus and decided to remove the screen that separated whites from blacks. In the midst of the uproar, an old black lady got up and yelled at him for disrespecting white folks, threatened to tell his parents, and dragged him off the bus. Once they were safely out of sight, she hugged him and told him, never stop.

“She stayed for a while. She was praying and she thanked God for me,” he recalls. “That was a tremendous motivator.”

Years later, over the course of several months in a Mississippi jail, Jerome made friends with the illiterate, epileptic white man in the cell block next to him. He saved his life during a seizure when the guards would not intervene, and wrote letters for his relatives. He recalls when the Salvation Army would visit in an attempt to convert them.

“I started speaking to them with a quote from ‘Amazing Grace’ and then something from the 23rd Psalm,” says Jerome. “He sort of joined into what I was saying.”

The Salvation Army missionaries couldn’t abide somebody talking back to them and soon left. “The real Christians were the ones behind the bars probably, me and him,” he reflects. “This little bird used to visit us through the broken window in our jail cell and sing for us every day. That was nice too.”

We have been talking for just over an hour when Jerome tells me he is out of time. He is trying to get to city hall before heading out to Mississippi later that same day.

“I’m going to visit some folks that were involved in this movement with me,” he explains. “Time is passing and sometimes you need just to see certain folks.”

He says the students at the vigil last night got him thinking back to the early days of the Mississippi Summer, with Chaney, Goodman, and the rest of his friends. “We were all bright-eyed and innocent back then.”

That was why he decided to do the interview, Jerome tells me. “Probably another time I would have said no.” And then he is getting up from the table, almost brusquely. I barely get a chance to thank him as he walks away.

After the interview I decide to drive by St. Augustine one more time. For a while I stand around in front, at the Tomb of the Unknown Slave, chatting with the Swiss documentary team. Word is that a meeting with the archdiocese is happening at 2 PM. Sandra Gordon walks past on the sidewalk, along with two white men in clerical collars that I don't recognize. The documentary team races after them, only to have the doors of the rectory shut in their faces.

At this point, I know it's time to go. It's a two-day drive back to Charlotte, and I've got a hyperactive Siberian husky at home, not to mention a husband who misses me. Besides, I have a suspicion (which turns out to be correct) that the saga of St. Augustine won't be over for weeks.

Before dawn on Monday, March 20, 2006, ten student activists and two parishioners took over the church rectory. The protesters would occupy the building for nearly three weeks, while parish members held vigil outside. Jesse Jackson, Al Sharpton, and former mayor Marc Morial all visited the church to show support. The conflict reached its low point after a confrontation between sign-carrying protesters and armed plainclothes policemen, requested by Father Michael Jacques for added security during

his first Sunday Mass. The archdiocese deconsecrated the sanctuary and removed the tabernacle, claiming that sacrilege had been committed. But in the end, mediation talks led by Ted Quant of Loyola University prevailed; the parish would reopen, on condition that it meet a series of administrative and financial benchmarks over the next 18 months. The church was re-consecrated, and Archbishop Alfred Hughes, Father Jerome LeDoux, and Father Michael Jacques celebrated Palm Sunday Mass together.

This resolution points to the power that a shared religious narrative can hold. Neither side was willing to let the church stand shuttered and empty for Palm Sunday and Easter, so they found a way to compromise. It also points to the role of faith as an agent and catalyst for change.

I am convinced that parishioners could not have won this battle without their deep belief that God was on their side. Having lost so much already to the hurricane, the people of St. Augustine turned all their energy into preserving this one place. Their faith that their prayers would be answered made it possible to continue when every indication went against them. Failure became inconceivable, and as such, it was always possible to hold out one more day.

I spoke to Sandra Gordon by phone shortly after the parish had reopened. “It has brought our parish together and made our faith stronger,” she says. “It was like God chose us to go through this valley and carry this cross.”

In New Orleans, I have seen ample evidence of the good that religion can do: from the triumphant reconciliation of the archdiocese and St. Augustine, to the social work of Catholic Charities, to the sustaining community of black Baptist churches, to the

evangelical Protestant volunteers who came from all over the country to help rebuild the Gulf Coast.

But my original question was about God, not religion. I still don't have a good answer.

“All too often, none of the popular theological responses to disaster feels anywhere close to right. The ones that don't feel malicious still feel impotent... Can we talk about God after a disaster? Should we?” writes Mark Douglas, a professor at the Columbia Theology Seminar of the Presbyterian Church USA in Decatur, Georgia.¹

God is all-powerful, caring, and comprehensible. Pick any two—you can't have all three. I have done enough background reading to know that the answer that is comforting to one person may be completely unsatisfying to the next.

This is all part of God's plan.

God is suffering with us.

Our present suffering does not matter, because we look forward to eternal life.

The most popular line of reasoning seems to be that God does not really want any of these bad things to happen to us, but due to the laws of nature and free will, God cannot prevent it. Most contemporary readers reject the argument of Job—that God is just too big and powerful and awe-inducing to understand. I tend to prefer Job's explanation, partly because it keeps God present in the world and partly because it acknowledges the impossibility of ever getting a fully satisfactory response to our questions.

On my way out, I will drive through St. Bernard Parish and the Lower Ninth Ward. There I will see scenes of devastation and absurdity—a powerboat overturned in

an alleyway, cleanup volunteers in surgical masks, a neat suburban street with a FEMA trailer in front of every house.

But over the long drive home, what stays with me are the words here on Governor Nicholls Street, above the iron crosses and chains at the Tomb of the Unknown Slave:

This St. Augustine/Treme shrine honors all slaves buried throughout the United States and those slaves in particular who lie beneath the ground of Treme in unmarked, unknown graves. There is no doubt that the campus of St. Augustine Church sits astride the blood, sweat, tears and some of the mortal remains of unknown slaves from Africa and local American Indian slaves who either met with fatal treachery, and were therefore buried quickly and secretly, or were buried hastily and at random because of yellow fever and other plagues. Even now, some Treme locals have childhood memories of salvage/restoration workers unearthing various human bones, sometimes in concentrated areas such as wells. In other words, the Tomb of the Unknown Slave is a constant reminder that we are walking on holy ground. Thus, we cannot consecrate this tomb, because it is already consecrated by many slaves' inglorious deaths bereft of any acknowledgment, dignity or respect, but ultimately glorious by their blood, sweat, tears, faith, prayers, and deep worship of our creator.

I am beginning to understand that holy is a word for suffering and death, at least as much as for miracles and joy. We have no other language that is adequate.