

Buffalonians Brave Blizzard to Aid At-Risk Neighbors and Strangers

The Wired Word for the Week of January 8, 2023

In the News

In the closing days of 2022, as if to put an exclamation point on an extraordinarily stressful period in the nation and world, a historic blizzard hit the United States, causing widespread power outages, over 15,000 flight cancellations, icy roads, whiteouts and deep snow. Nearly 70 storm-related deaths were reported across the country, with at least 39 in western New York. Some died at home or stuck in cars due to lack of heat; others suffered cardiac events while shoveling or snow-blowing. In some cases, due to impassable streets, emergency personnel were unable to reach people in need of medical care.

As residents and travelers struggled to cope, stories of generous hospitality, kindness, ingenuity and selfless acts of courage began to emerge. Some people unexpectedly became rescuers and caregivers for at-risk neighbors or total strangers, with whom they built new relationships and community. Here are a few accounts from the greater Buffalo, New York, area:

Jay Withey, a mechanic from Kenmore, New York, responded to a friend's call for help, but his truck got stuck twice. He saw an inadequately clothed young man named Mike walking in the snowstorm and invited him into his vehicle. By this time, Withey was soaked to the skin and had little fuel left in the truck. He began knocking on doors, begging, "Please, please can I sleep on the floor, I'm in fear for my life." No one took him in.

After rejoining Mike in the truck, Withey called 911, but police said they couldn't get to him. Some time later, Mary, an elderly woman, knocked on the window, asking for assistance. She had been driving when she got stuck, and had been in her car for seven hours. Withey invited her in, too.

As the hours wore on, the situation became more dire. The trio needed to find warmth, shelter, food and a bathroom. Using his phone, Withey saw they were near a school, so he broke a window to gain entry. He discovered over 20 people between the ages of 20 and 70, as well as two pet dogs, stranded in cars in the vicinity and urged them all to come into the academy. The group scrounged around for food in the cafeteria, blankets in the nurse's office and mats in the gym.

On Christmas morning, the group borrowed school snowblowers to dig out their cars. One neighbor who had refused Withey's plea for shelter approached him as they were clearing away the snow. In tears, the man apologized, saying he hadn't been able to sleep that night, knowing he had left Withey out in the cold. But the mechanic was philosophical about his ordeal, calling it a

blessing in disguise. He reflected on the thought that if someone had taken him in that night, who knows what might have happened to all the other stranded people?

The group made sure to clean up after themselves before they left the premises. For his part, Withey wrote a note apologizing for the break-in: "To Whomever It May Concern, I'm terribly sorry about breaking the school window & for breaking in the kitchen. Got stuck at 8pm Friday and slept in my truck with two strangers just trying not to die. There were 7 elderly people also stuck and out of fuel. I had to do it to save everyone and get them shelter and food and a bathroom. Merry Christmas. Jay."

"My mission was just to keep going out and grabbing as many people as I can and to just keep going," Withey told *NBC News*. "I just kept walking, and I walked until I cried and I couldn't walk any further. I was just beat."

The Cheektowaga authorities have no intention of charging Withey with a crime, even though technically he broke the law when he broke into the school. In fact, they praised him as a community-minded hero and thanked him for taking action that saved lives.

"Jay said they are all now like family and planning a SUMMER get together," the Cheektowaga Police Department wrote as a caption on a photo of the accidental school squatters.

"I hope people realize it's important to be kind and to do the right thing to help one another," Withey said.

During what dentist Alex Campagna called "the Darth Vader of storms," he said he and his wife Andrea became "accidental innkeepers" when a group of South Korean tourists en route from Washington, D.C., to Niagara Falls got stuck in the snow near their home in Williamsville, New York. Two men from the group knocked on their door to ask for shovels to try to get their van out of a ditch. When it became obvious that the storm wasn't going to let up, the Campagnas invited the tourists to be their guests. They raided their freezer and pantry, and soon were enjoying Korean cuisine prepared by members of the tour group.

Honeymooners Yoseb and Claire Choi didn't get to see the falls as planned, but Mr. Choi said the snowstorm had given them the chance to experience a "warm welcome from real Americans."

Ms. Campagna said of their unexpected company, "We really connected with them. They became like family to us," adding that they just might take a trip to South Korea to visit their new friends, who have invited them to tour their country.

On Christmas Eve, Sha'Kyra Aughtry and her boyfriend, Trent, rescued Joe White, 64, a developmentally disabled man who got stuck out in the frigid cold as he tried to get to work at a movie theater. Aughtry used a blow-dryer to warm White's body, which was encased in ice.

"I don't care about nothing else," she said. "This man is not about to die over here." Desperate to get White medical care, she posted about his condition on social media, and a group of strangers showed up to take him to the hospital, where he was recovering from fourth-degree frostbite.

At the height of the blizzard, Pastors Al and Vivian Robinson opened their Buffalo church, Spirit of Truth Urban Ministry, the only building in their area that had power, to 154 people who needed a warm place to sleep and eat. Fewer than five were members of their congregation.

"Honestly, it was total strangers. We had Asian ... Hispanic ... Arabic speaking people ... Nigerians ... every possible minority," Pastor Al said. "I have this huge family now that ... we are ... trauma bonded through the storm and it's just beautiful."

More on this story can be found at these links:

['I Had to Do It to Save Everyone': Man Breaks Into School and Shelters More Than 20 People From Blizzard. *CNN*](#)

[Buffalo Woman Saves Life of Disabled Man With Severe Frostbite: 'This Man Is Not About to Die.' *People*](#)

[They Traveled From South Korea. They Got Stranded Near Buffalo. *The New York Times*](#)

[Buffalo Pastors Rescued More Than 100 People and Housed Them in Their Church During the Historic Blizzard. *CNN*](#)

Applying the News Story

In a 2015 interview titled "[What Makes a Do-Gooder Do Good? And How Come We Sometimes Resent Them?](#)" Amy Costello, of the podcast *Tiny Spark*, questioned author Larissa MacFarquhar about why the term "do-gooder" is often used in a pejorative manner.

MacFarquhar responded, "We are selfish, we are lazy, we are conventional, we like our stuff, and we don't like to hear of someone who makes us feel bad about the way we live our lives. [Do-gooders] make us feel guilty, even if they don't say anything to us. Or we may have a clichéd notion that someone who does very good deeds is likely to be self-righteous or judgmental, and we don't like that sort of person."

Yet the Bible is replete with passages from different writers, advising the readers to do good and not evil. While the gospel message clearly tells us we are not saved by our good works ([Ephesians 2:8-9](#)), we are also told we are not to continue in sin ([Romans 6:1-2](#)). Christ's death and resurrection are meant to transform our self-centeredness into God-centeredness, our evil deeds into good works that flow out of our gratitude to God for acting to save us.

The Big Questions

1. How are the experiences of the people in the News section above evidence, not only that some humans are kind, clever and determined to render aid to the needy, but also that God is still active and at work in our world today?
2. How might reflecting on God's goodness to us motivate us to be good to one another? To God's creation?

3. Is there a universal hierarchy of laws by which certain principles may supersede lesser laws? If so, how does that work? Who determines what that legal structure should look like? What problems might ensue with such a structure?
4. What happens to our code of conduct when we face extreme conditions that may require breaking rules to achieve a greater good? When did Jesus break with tradition to follow what he considered a "higher" law?
5. When have you failed to recognize an opportunity to bless others until after it passed, or failed to respond to a deep need that you saw in front of you -- possibly assuming that someone else, maybe even God, would take care of it? What happened if and when you confessed your failure to be the hands and feet of Christ in that crisis?

Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

Genesis 1:27-31

*So God created humans in his image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them.*

God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth." God said, "See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. And to every beast of the earth and to every bird of the air and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food." And it was so. God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day. (For context, read [Genesis 1:25-31](#).)

In this account of creation, the writer says that after God completed each of several phases of the work, "God saw that *it was good*" (vv. 4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25). But with the creation of human beings, "God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, *it was very good*" (v. 31).

God, who is light ([1 John 1:5](#)), didn't make the heavenly lights and planets because he needed help telling time or a light to find his way in the darkness; he set them in the sky "to give light upon the earth" ([Genesis 1:17](#)). God didn't make the plants and seeds because he was hungry, but to provide for humans, as well as for fish of the sea, birds of the air and beasts of the earth ([Genesis 1:29-30](#)). God didn't make the Sabbath ([Genesis 2:1-3](#)) because he needed a rest, although he "rested." (Jesus tells us in [Mark 2:27](#) that "the Sabbath was made for humankind.")

Questions: What made God's creation "good" and the creation of humankind "very good"? How do God's stated purposes in creating the lights and plants and other aspects of nature, not for himself, but for others, help us understand what is meant by "goodness"?

Considering that God saw everything he made as *very* good, how should we feel about our own worth? What does that suggest about how we should value other human beings and the rest of creation?

Romans 8:28-29

We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family. (For context, read [Romans 8:18-39](#).)

Paul writes candidly in this passage about what he calls "the sufferings of this present time" (v. 18) and creation's "enslavement to decay" (v. 21), which he compares to "the pains of labor" (v. 22). Creation "groans" with longing to be set free, as do even those "who have the first fruits of the Spirit" (v. 23), who likewise joins in our groanings (vv. 26-27) as we wait in hope for "the glory about to be revealed to us" (v. 18).

We never want to mouth easy platitudes that minimize the hardship and cruelty of people's suffering. We must acknowledge that pain and anguish are real. At the same time, the gospel gives us hope that pain is not the last word.

Whatever adversities we face and whatever enemies assail, Christ, who died and was raised, who is also at the right hand of God, intercedes for us (v. 34). Paul asserts that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (vv. 35-39). "Nothing" includes blizzards.

In the news story, Withey discovered that being rejected when he knocked on about 10 doors ultimately led him to the school, where he was able to lead many others to safety. Being rejected was one of those things that God "worked together for good" -- for Withey and for others in need.

Jesus was also rejected, according to John, the Gospel writer: "He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him" ([John 1:11](#)). Withey is not Jesus, of course, but he might serve as a sign of Christ to remind us that even out of rejection, God can create community, "a large family" of faith (Romans 8:29).

Questions: When have you experienced God working all things together for good? How do the death and resurrection of Christ illustrate the truth that God works all things together for good for those who love God?

Titus 3:8-9, 14

The saying is sure. I desire that you insist on these things, so that those who have come to believe in God may be careful to devote themselves to good works; these things are excellent and profitable to everyone. But avoid stupid controversies, genealogies, dissensions, and quarrels about the law, for they are unprofitable and worthless. ... And let people learn to devote themselves to good works in order to meet urgent needs, so that they may not be unproductive. (For context, read [Titus 3:8-11, 14](#).)

Paul counsels Titus that as a pastor, he should insist that those who believe in God be devoted to good works to meet urgent needs. Doing good is excellent, profitable and productive, while arguing and quarreling about stupid controversies are worthless wastes of time, breath and energy. John says something similar in 1 John 3:18: "Little children, let us love not in word or speech but in deed and truth."

We note also that devoting oneself to good works may not come easily at first, but it is a skill and a spiritual discipline that can and must be learned. Centuries before the writing of this letter to Titus, the prophet Isaiah called on the people of God to cease from their violent ways and "learn to do good," which he defined as seeking justice, rescuing the oppressed, defending the orphan and pleading for the widow ([Isaiah 1:16-17](#)). Doing good requires more than flapping the lips; action is necessary!

Questions: How do people learn to do good? What profit is produced by doing good? How did the people who helped others in the news article profit by doing good?

1 John 3:14-17

We know that we have passed from death to life because we love the brothers and sisters. Whoever does not love abides in death. All who hate a brother or sister are murderers, and you know that murderers do not have eternal life abiding in them. We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us -- and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers and sisters. How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help? (For context, read [1 John 3:11-17](#).)

Earlier in the text, the writer says we are not to be like Cain, who murdered his brother (vv. 11-12). John is referring, of course, to the story found in [Genesis 4:6-10](#), where God asks Cain where his brother Abel is.

"I do not know; am I my brother's keeper?" is Cain's callous retort. Cain may have been alive physically, but spiritually he was dead, because he failed to love his brother.

John returns repeatedly to what he sees as the heart of the gospel message: God's love for us, shown in the willingness of Christ to sacrifice himself to save us. This love calls us to sacrificial love for people in need. While Christ gave his very life to demonstrate the great love of God, the way we prove our love for others doesn't often require much of a sacrifice by comparison.

Helping a brother or sister in need seems like a pittance compared to what Jesus did for us! James sees meeting people's basic needs for food and clothing as evidence of one's faith in God ([James 2:14-17](#)). In our text, John sees helping those in need as proof that God's love abides within. And he indicates that those who love others are really alive, even if they die in the process of loving others.

Question: When have you seen evidence of God's love in help offered to people in need?

For Further Discussion

1. Respond to this, from *TWW* team member Jim Berger, whose community suffered great losses just over three months ago during Hurricane Ian: "As the water rose in their own single-story home, a family on Sanibel Island dashed across the street to a neighbor's two-story house. The owners of the taller structure were up north, and the door was locked. "The wife grabbed a rock and broke the window to get in, and they survived," Berger wrote. "She later contacted the neighbor and apologized. The neighbor said, 'No, you did the right thing! That was life and death! I'm glad you broke our window because that means you're alive! You're worth a lot more than a window!'"

2. In the 1982 Steven Spielberg movie *ET, the Extra-Terrestrial*, Gertie sees ET practicing the letters of the alphabet while he watches a videotape. When ET says the letter "B," Gertie is delighted and responds, "Good!" Later, when ET is saying farewell to the children as he prepares to board the spaceship that will return him to his own planet, he repeats his earlier exchange with Gertie, with a new meaning, "Be good!" ([Video 0:06](#)).

Here are some of Jesus' last words to his disciples as he prepared to go to the cross.

- "So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you." ([John 13:14-15](#))
- "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." ([John 13:34-35](#))
- "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. ... I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another." ([John 15:12-14, 17](#))

How might ET's last words to Gertie to "be good" resonate with Jesus' last words to his disciples about loving one another?

3. Share to the extent you feel comfortable incidents when strangers came through for you in times of real stress and even danger, and/or when you came through for strangers.

Responding to the News

Take a moment to worship God and to reflect on God's goodness as you listen to Twila Paris singing her song "[You Have Been Good](#)" ([Video 3:41](#)).

Prayer (suggested by [Psalm 136:1](#); [Isaiah 25:4](#); [Acts 10:38](#); [1 Corinthians 12:27](#))

We give thanks to you, O Lord, for you are good,
your steadfast love endures forever.
O Lord our God, we praise your name,
for you have been a refuge to the poor,
a refuge to the needy in their distress,
a shelter from the blizzard and a help in desperate times.

Teach us to do good at every opportunity,
and show us how to do good.
You anointed Jesus with the Holy Spirit,
empowering him and demonstrating your presence with him
as he went about doing good.
Anoint and empower us also, who are members of his body,
to do good
as his hands to help,
his feet to walk alongside,
his arms to hold,
his shoulders to cry on and his shoulders to the wheel,
his mouth to smile and his lips to kiss,
his eyes to see and his ears to listen,
his heart to love,
so that everyone we encounter
will feel the breath of your presence and be blessed. Amen.

Copyright 2023 Communication Resources