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Power Outage — A Reflection on Our Electric Lives

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The remnants of Hurricane Ike brought a very unexpected windstorm to Louisville, Kentucky on Sunday. Worshipers in area churches heard and felt the massive winds hit at just about the time morning services were ending. By the time most got home, the winds — sustained at over 70 miles per hour — had done significant damage to trees and power lines.

By nightfall, the impact was obvious. We are not threatened by short interruptions in electrical power. We generally assume the power will soon come back on. In this case, most of the city appeared to be dark — very dark.

Our immediate responsibility was to take care of the hundreds of students and student families on the campus, and the whole seminary community pulled together. There were signs of God's mercy around us. First of all, no one was hurt. There was no structural damage to our campus. The weather was cool and the moon was bright. Our prayers were with those in genuine distress, such as the residents and refugees who suffered real losses in Hurricane Ike's earlier history.



We were not in danger, so long as we took care of the vulnerable here. We were, for the most part, inconvenienced. But . . . as the hours and days ahead made clear, we were very inconvenienced. In fact, we were largely out of commission.

We could not hold classes. There was no way we could safely bring hundreds of people into darkened buildings for instruction. It was not just about being without power for laptops and video screens; it was about safety. No lights to see in hallways and bathrooms. No adequate security and alarm systems. No means of communication in case of emergency.

Nevertheless, we learned a lot in the dark. For one thing, we were forced to face the reality that electrical power is so woven into our lives that being without it is not only inconvenient, but potentially life threatening. Food quickly spoils, medicines go bad, systems start to fail, and evildoers have the cover of darkness.

Our homes are largely uninhabitable without power over days. Our institutions are often reduced to darkened buildings. Phones go unanswered, computers no longer compute. Basic and emergency services are, as the military says, lean on the ground. Communication is itself a problem. How do people without power check for information on the Internet? Cell phones quickly die, and folks are seen charging phones in cars — assuming that the cell systems work anyway.

The usual entertainments of the digital age go dead, and the elegant pleasure of reading a book becomes difficult. Reading by candlelight is nostalgic, but not easy. The legacy of scholars, readers, and writers of previous eras — all before the electric light — grows more impressive.

People go outside and sit in what remains of the natural light. Our homes and buildings seem designed more to keep that light out, rather than to let it in. Why did we not notice this before?

We have grown dependent on electrical power, and there appears to be no turning back. Given the choice, there is no

way we are going to return to a day without electric lights, ventilators in hospitals, traffic lights at intersections, air conditioning, computers, and air traffic control.

There is no going back. Electricity is now basic to our way of life — to cities and farms, to hygiene and health, to eating and cooking, to even how we can communicate with each other. We find this out in the dark.

Folks who want us to cut back on energy consumption and to develop alternative energy sources — both worthy goals — go on the electronic media to make their case against reliance on electricity. We can certainly learn to save energy, but it does not appear that we can function well without it.

Now, for most of our campus, the power is back. Still, well over 150,000 homes and businesses, including many involving our friends, faculty, and neighbors, remain without power — perhaps for some time. Area schools remain out of session and nerves are growing frayed.

The Lord, as the Bible says, causes it to rain on both the just and the unjust. Churches and taverns are both dark. Darkness fell on those doing good and those doing evil. The difference may not be evident again until the lights come back on.

In John 9:4, Jesus tells his disciples, “We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming, when no one can work.”

This week, that verse has taken on a whole new meaning.

