

The Eye of the Storm

Out at the very eastern end of US Highway 21, just beyond the swampy coastlands of South Carolina and a little north of Hilton Head – or “Concrete Island,” as some of the locals call it – is a narrow strip of outer bank called Hunting Island. Famous for its beautifully photogenic black and white lighthouse, the rest of the island has little that would draw your attention. The sand is so densely forested with leafy hardwoods, pine trees, hanging vines, and palmettos that it became a stand-in for Vietnam in the movie *Forrest Gump*. I visited Hunting Island during a week-long high school mission trip to Beaufort, South Carolina, and I decided it was worth a return trip.

And so it came to be that one balmy December afternoon, Kristin and I found ourselves scheming to find the camping spot that was absolutely the closest one to the beach in the campground there. Being the backpacking purists that we were, we had had to borrow a car-camping tent from my parents in order to have sleeping quarters in which we could actually stand up. We cooked a nice meal, puttered around in camp, and enjoyed a quiet sunset walk on the beach before the temperature cooled down enough that we headed for the sleeping bags.

And then, the wind started. What started as a breezy chill wasted no time in becoming a gusty blowing mess. All that time we spent finding the closest tent site to the beach really paid off as our high, roomy tent became a lightly anchored sail around us. In between gusts, I escaped from the tent to lurch my way to the car for the smaller, but far stronger, backpacking tent. Being young and male, I had often idealized just such conditions for setting up my tent and – true to form – had it up and secure in just a few short minutes. With the windstorm blowing wildly around us, we transferred everything from one tent to the other, and then I pulled the other tent down and crammed it into the trunk of the car before diving into our new shelter. The next morning I found the rainfly on the other side of the campground. The wind blew relentlessly for the entire night, with the tent rattling and shifting with each new gust. It would have almost been tolerable for sleep except that – at unpredictable intervals – palmetto fronds would slam into the side of the tent, startling us both awake. It was one of our more memorable camping experiences.

What we experienced that night in South Carolina was, in most respects, fairly tame compared to what most people living on the Atlantic Coast experience on a pretty regular basis. When a hurricane wells up off shore, all bets are off – you had better have a plan. I have a friend in south Florida who can rattle off the merits of various types of hurricane shutters without thinking twice. Like most people there, he knows what to expect when a storm comes, he has a pretty good idea of what conditions are bad enough to make him head inland, and which ones aren't worth the trouble of getting out of town. I read once about a family who made the wrong decision on this, and as a hurricane blew through their city, they began to see their house falling apart around them.

But hurricanes have a pattern, a shape, a predictable set of events. First is the surge of water blowing inland and flooding the low areas. Then comes the wind, blowing outrageously hard, and then, without warning, without explanation, it is calm. Dead calm. But we all know it won't last – this is the eye of the storm.

Strangely enough, stories in the gospels take on a similar pattern. People with much keener eyes than mine have picked up on a form, a template that the gospel writers used when they recorded their stories.

They call it a chiasm; or – when they’re really writing to impress – they refer to a story’s *chiastic structure*. Write that down – there will be a quiz next week. The bible is riddled with chiasms, and they take on the form of A-B-A, or A-B-C-B-A; with each letter serving either to draw you deeper into our work your way out of some deeper truth the writer is emphasizing. And that deep truth, like the eye of the hurricane, falls right in the center.

Today’s gospel story is a turning point in Mark, after a few chapters of parables, we are suddenly on a journey. And today’s gospel story is the opening, the A, of a chiasm that continues through the next two chapters – the next several Sundays. After the calming of the storm, Jesus casts out demons and heals the sick. Then his ministry is rejected in his own hometown. On the way out the other side, Jesus’ ministry is rocked further by the news that his friend and mentor, his cousin John, has been beheaded by king Herod. After that come more healing and casting out demons until finally we reach the other side: another story of the disciples rowing through a storm; only this time Jesus is walking on the water. So what’s in the middle, what’s the eye of this windstorm? Mission. The central feature of this part of Mark’s gospel is the point at which Jesus sends out seventy disciples to live their calling – to discover that sweet spot where their deepest joy matches the needs of the world they encounter. This is the place God has for us, the eye of the storm, if you will.

The eye of the storm... because the author of Mark takes great care to surround this place of divine union, this discernment of our truest calling, to surround it with fear, with failure, with rejection. And so here we are, at the cusp of this new story, contemplating a Jesus who – having left things in the capable hands of his boat-savvy disciples to finally take a well-deserved nap – is now glaring in resentment at his closest friends as he tells the storm to pipe down. Now stumbling back to the stern to fall down again to his pillow, thoroughly irritated. This is the same God who speaks to Job out of the whirlwind – Job who, despite his best efforts, cannot help himself but act as though his individual suffering should be first on God’s priority list. The answer he gets is no answer at all. “Where were you when I made the earth, pal?” This is that crazy shepherd, the one who – for no apparent reason – has taken the fork in the road that goes right through the valley of the shadow of death.

What is this storm? Who is this God that all-but ignores the efforts we put forth to be good, the keep the boat from sinking, only to chastise us for a lack of faith or the smallness of our desires? This is the God, quite simply, who demands all, who sets a course for deep and dangerous waters, leaving our tinny virtues bobbing in the wake. Annie Dillard once said that the ushers in church on Sundays ought to hand out life jackets and crash helmets, that we should be lashed to our pews in expectation that “God may draw us to where we can never return.” John Muir, camped in a grove of the worlds largest trees, climbed to the top of one and lashed himself there with his belt, just for the sheer joy of riding a tree in a windstorm. Yes, God wants everything, but not because God is angry or resentful or looking for a few more chips to buy into another round of blackjack with the devil. God does not want in the way that we understand it. God *wants* – that is – God moves relentlessly in the direction of – healing, peace, reconciliation, joy.

And it is precisely this desire on God’s part that terrifies us. I want to look at my calendar and say “hey, God, I have a few hours on Tuesday. What say I go put in some volunteer time at the food bank?”, but God’s picture is so much larger than mine. I filter my reality through the lenses of comfort, control, and safety, but God sees the whole picture, no lenses needed. “Two hours on a weekday is fine,” God says,

“but you need to understand that you’re still holding on to some things I want. It’s not your time, it’s not your money, it’s not your long-suffering forbearance for people who annoy you.” No. What God sees, friends, is what we’ve tried so hard to cram under the bed and seal carefully in the attic, away from prying eyes. God sees what we hold on to so tightly that we can’t even feel our grip. What God is after is our fears, our hurts, our shame, our inadequacy, our rage, our indifference. God knows that we hide all these things even from ourselves, that we cannot let go of our own accord but that we instead have to be shaken loose, that we will not willingly go to that place of vulnerability. God wants to take those things away because God knows we could use the extra space in our souls, and because those hidden parts of ourselves are the raw materials that God uses to bring the world to life. It goes all the way back to the beginning, with the Spirit moving over the waters of the deep. Those waters need some stirring; what better than a windstorm?

Hurricanes dredge up things we’d rather not see, but have to look at anyway. Hurricane Katrina, for instance, uncovered a deeply toxic well of racism in our culture that we all knew was there anyway. What we didn’t know – and still can’t seem to admit as a nation – is just how extensive that well is. The storm is still raging on as we confront this week the loss of ten black men and women cut down in prayer. It is awful, sickening stuff, but what I found inside myself might have been worse still. My first thought in the wake of the tragedy was an anxious assurance to myself that such a thing would never happen here. What I didn’t want to admit is why I felt so certain: because we’re a white church. Now, I could hang on to that shame, I could hide it behind a mask of concern others and anger at an unjust system and just pretend it isn’t there. But until I say it out loud I can’t see what God does: that underneath it all, I’m not able to know the love that comes from kinship with all of my sisters and brothers in Christ. God wants to take that away from me, and I hope it doesn’t take too many more waves for it to happen.

The eye of the storm is that place of peace and calm, that place where you can see reality for what it truly is instead of what benefit it has for you personally. In the twenty minutes before the winds came back, the family in the falling down house were able to get themselves and some basic supplies into a storm shelter down the street. They lost a lot, but they also realized how little that lot was worth. Now I don’t want you to think for one second that God sends natural disasters to wake us up: they cause disasters that no one deserves. But we are made for eternity: we will mourn some, we will laugh some, and no matter what we’ll be doing it together.

In the mean time, God will continue to mix up our charts and steer us out into the deep. Every rough patch of water has the potential to loosen our grip on those things which hold us back. The storm on Hunting Island was nothing compared to the storm that has overtaken South Carolina this week, and I know that on some level we will all have trouble sleeping as the wind continues to blow through this night. But it is not the storms that will kill our souls, but our inability to feel compassion because of our fears. The burdens that we try to hide will eventually sink us. Jesus was irritated with the disciples because he had a longer term vision, he knew the truth of what we are made for, and he showed it a few weeks later. We are made to be free from fear and shame and unforgiven hurts, made to be light enough that even if the boat sinks, we can just walk to shore.