

Out of the Storm: Reflections the Week After

Reprint from November 5, 2012 in the aftermath of hurricane Sandy.

What a week it was! It began with weather reports more and more ominous and then that calm eerie quiet before the storm. The earth went silent. The late-afternoon sky became more leaden still. The air began to stir, to growl, to take on dark energy. The winds picked up and turned into a dull, unrelenting roar. Windows and doors braced themselves, tested themselves, against the gathering fury.

At dusk we heard the first crack of a great old tree, the deadly thud with which it hit the ground. But at least we still had TV and a sense of our togetherness in all this. And then the TV went dead, as did the Internet and phone, and we were all alone. Outside the pitch-black sky lit up with exploding transformers. Lights flickered, but held. They flickered and held once more. Then they flickered and went out.

Now, by flashlight and candle we make our way through the night, fierce wind howling all around us, the sharp reports almost like gunfire as one after another other giant trees give way, our very walls rattling now, the incessant roar of the long night punctuated loudly by unsettling sirens racing through the dark.

We emerge at last to a gray dawn, and one by one we set out to see the destruction all around us, the monstrous fallen trees, the blown-through fences, the dangling electrical wires, the blocked roads, cars and roofs crushed, rail lines barricaded by storm debris, down by the coastline water everywhere, the subways of lower Manhattan flooded, inoperable for day, the mayhem and tragedy in the Rockaways and Staten Island far worse.

Some of us unaccountably, really, did not lose power. Others got theirs back quite quickly. Still others don't have it yet and really don't know when they will. We run into Starbucks and run back out; the whole world's there. We wait in line for gas. We find ourselves in stores with shelves half-empty that can take cash only.

As the days begin to pass, for some life returns almost to normal, but for many others spirits sag under the weight of the cold, the dark, the uncertainty of when life will be back as they know it.

But the storm does have its wisdom. If Isaiah or Amos were alive today, we could well suppose their speaking for God and saying,

“You have forgotten me.
You have forgotten anything transcendent.
You see nothing larger than your own life
and your own momentary, passing concerns.
But I will flood your shores with walls of water.

I will bring down the mightiest of your trees;
they will snap like matchsticks.
I will blow down your fences;
I will block your roads and your rails.
I will leave you in the dark and the cold.
And I will make you see again.”

So what do we see? What do we learn from the storm? Surely this – that things break down, they come and go, and often they are far outside our control. Think, scheme, plan as we wish, we cannot eliminate risk, danger, change and uncertainty.

And in the primal elemental power of nature turned savage we gain perspective. Some things that mattered so much to us a week ago, that obsessed and disturbed us then, matter far less to us now. Our souls are scrubbed clean again. And perhaps life reveals itself to be a little more precious. The joy in life, it turns out, really is in unexpected friendly conversations, in neighbors coming together with their rusted bow saws to cut a fallen tree away from a house, in small acts of kindness, in simple joys, in quiet pleasures. And now we maybe appreciate more four walls around us, a dry roof above us, lights that shine, furnaces that heat, even our arthritic Internet server that had till now been driving us slightly crazy.

But we also know that everyone has their breaking point. You see it in the haunted eyes of the aged woman bagging up your groceries who freely, almost desperately, tells you she’s still a week later without power, as if she hopes you might be the one who can make it all better, who can make the cold and dark go away for her. You hear it in the rage at gas pumps from drivers who’ve waited sometimes hours to fill up. Days that seem adventurous in ones and twos turn into sullen endurance beyond that.

This then is perhaps the deepest lesson from the storm. We have to have something inside ourselves that works not just when all is well, when all goes according to how we’ve planned, but also when chaos breaks out, and we are far off script. A base-line trust is good; a joyous God-consciousness is better still. Therein lies true freedom, freedom to accept the unexpected, freedom to be able to adapt to whatever we face while growing ever more confident that beneath all things there is meaning, there is purpose, there is connection, there is God and God’s unfailing love.

– Dale Pauls