

We are here.

*Sermon preached by the Rev. Lynn C. Sanders, Associate Rector,
at the eleven o'clock service, August 28, 2011, The Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost.
Based on Romans 12:9-21 and Matthew 16:21-28.*

Well, here we are. I have wondered all week what condition we, our church and our city, might find ourselves in this morning. It seems we're still waiting—for more rain or less rain, for more wind or less wind. None of us knows what the rest of this day will bring. But I do know that I am glad to be here, and I am glad you are here.

I found it impossible this week to craft a sermon far ahead of time—not because of procrastination, or because it was an especially busy week, or even because of the earthquake. It was because of the uncertainty about this hurricane that has hung like fog over us all week.

We knew Hurricane Irene was forming. We watched as it grew and passed over the Bahamas. We saw the computer models predicting its path up the East Coast. I kept hoping that the unpredictability inherent in all hurricanes would kick in and send it blowing out to the Atlantic rather than toward us.

The gorgeous, clear, sunny low-humidity weather we had earlier this week (earthquake notwithstanding) made it hard to envision that we might soon be dealing with a hurricane. But by Thursday things got serious and we began to make real preparations. By Thursday night store shelves in New Jersey were bare.

On Friday morning I went running in Central Park, and ran with an odd sense that this might be the last time I could do this for a while: who knows how this storm might change this landscape, or might change me. Exactly five years ago this week, Hurricane Katrina was on the move. Five years ago tomorrow, Katrina hit New Orleans and changed life there forever.

I'd been resisting doing anything different from my usual routine, which I suppose was a form of magical thinking. But on Friday morning I finally broke down and bought some bottles of water (the last ones of their brand on the shelves) and some non-perishable food items.

Here at St. Bart's, we talked much about what would happen here today. Would the church be open? For what services? What would those services be like? Which of our staff might be able to get here safely? All practical and necessary questions, but pointing to the bigger question for us: What does it mean to be Church at a time like this?

Good Anglicans/Episcopalians that we are, we struggled to find the *via media* (middle way) between being the church we understand ourselves to be—an open, courageous, serving, welcoming church in this great city of New York—and placing the highest priority on our staff's and members' safety, given our likelihood of being directly in the hurricane's path.

It became clear that we needed to do what we do as Church and as St. Bart's in particular: to open our doors to any who are drawn here, to gather together as a faith community with whoever is able to be here, to offer sincere worship and praise and thanks to God, to pray together, to share a holy meal, and then to take what we have received here back out into the world, out into the hurricane, and share it with others as best we can.

Some of us arrived yesterday to spend the night here at the church; it was the only way we could be sure of being here this morning. That gave us many hours to catch up on work or to work ahead. Many of us found it impossible to concentrate on future projects, because it was difficult to envision our post-hurricane world.

Yet, for all that, we were able to focus on the needs of the present moment:

- The wedding scheduled for 4:30 p.m. yesterday in this beautiful space went on as planned. One hundred fifty people gathered from as far away as England and Switzerland (and Brooklyn, which seemed equally far away with the transit shutdown) to celebrate with this happy young couple and to support them as they began their marriage here.
- At 6 p.m. last night our overnight shelter opened as usual, as it does 365 nights a year.
- One of our colleagues cooked the most amazing delicious, healthy dinner for all of us who were here. We sat together around the table and enjoyed good food and conversation.
- Someone found flashlights; someone else loaded them with batteries that worked.

- Another person made sure there was ample water in case St. Bart's ancient plumbing failed. He also made sure each of us had a clean comfortable place to sleep in our various corners of this building.
- One of our Altar Guild leaders made a special trip here yesterday to set up for all our services. She did this only after we declined her heroic offer to stay here overnight herself.
- Late last night, before we went to sleep, several of us said a quiet service of Compline, the Episcopal Church's "goodnight prayer," and prayed for all those in the path of this storm.
- And at 4:30 this morning, folks got up to make hot coffee and hot breakfast for the 60 people who came to our soup kitchen this morning, the same way they and many others come here for breakfast several times a week, every week in every year.

We are Church. We are here. We are doing what we are called and able to do, thanks be to God. As the church has done in every time and in every place for thousands of years, through all storms, meteorological and otherwise.

Paul writes this wonderful letter to the fledgling church in Rome, giving them advice on how to treat each other (this is a letter to insiders) so that their young church will grow strong and flourish, so that it can minister through the storms it will face.

A generation later, Matthew writes for his own community who already face the storms of conflict and persecution. When Jesus says to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan!" he is refusing to be tempted away from what he understands his mission to be. Satan means "tempter." Temptation can be sweet, and so, well . . . tempting.

Amidst the events of this week, I heard this story, which I want to share with you. A husband loved his wife deeply and truly. She had just one fault that drove him crazy: she loved to shop and would buy expensive dresses on impulse. He sat her down and implored, "Darling, why do you do this when you know we can't afford it?" She replied, "Honey, I try not to, but I see a dress in the window, and then I say, I'll just try it on, no harm in that, but then it looks so great that I yield to temptation." He said, "Sweetheart, when that happens, you need to say, 'Get thee behind me, Satan,' and resist." She said she would. A week went by. No dresses. Two weeks. No dresses. Three weeks. Then she came home with the most elegant and expensive dress she had ever bought. Her husband, shocked and dismayed, asked, "Darling, what happened? Didn't you remember to say, 'Get thee behind me, Satan?'" "Yes, I did," she said. "But then Satan said, 'Wow! It looks even better from the back.'"

It was tempting to think of canceling all our services today. I could have happily slept in and then curled up with that novel I've been trying to get to. Some churches did cancel their services, and I intend no criticism of them: they surely struggled with their decision just as much as we did with ours. They made the decision they felt best for them in their particular location and circumstances.

I am really glad that St. Bart's decided to stay open today, offering our four services as usual, going about being Church as best we can in our location and circumstances amidst the rain and wind and continuing uncertainty.

One of the prayers in our beloved *Book of Common Prayer* reminds us: "Almighty God ... you have promised through your well-beloved Son that where two or three are gathered together in his Name, you will be in the midst of them." [A Prayer of St. Chrysostom, *BCP* 126]

Where two or three or fifteen or fifty or five hundred are gathered, God is in the midst of them.

Here we are.

We are here. And God is here.

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