

Stand Firm, then Act

Rob Gieselmann, Pent. 28C, Nov. 17, 2013

When Hurricane Isabel struck the Eastern Shore of Maryland in 2003, my children and I lived in the rectory of Old St. Paul's, in the middle of twenty acres of cemetery. Isabel had weakened during her trip up the Chesapeake Bay, so Tilly – who was six – and I decided we'd wander around the churchyard *to see what we could see*.

The sky was dark; the wind and clouds were swirling at 45 mph. The sky was spitting rain, but barely. As we wandered through the churchyard, among the centuries-old oak and coniferous trees – we suddenly heard a loud crack off to our left side. We turned, just in time to watch – about 30 feet away one of the ancient fall to the ground like Goliath, splaying equally ancient gravestones.

The crack we had heard had been the wood of the tree snapping at its base. Only forty-five miles per hour wind, but the real damage to Maryland's Eastern Shore was not caused by the wind, and trees falling, but by water. The Chesapeake Bay acted like a bathtub, with the tidal water sloshing *en masse* from one side – Baltimore – to the other side – ours.

The tidal surge – the rise in the water from normal – was only three or four feet, but even this small amount flooded thousands of acres of farmland, and hundreds of homes. Contrast the tidal surge of Hurricane Isabel with that of Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines last week. Their tidal surge was thirteen feet – Thirteen feet, meaning high tide would have been twenty feet above low tide. Add fifteen foot swells – and suddenly you have thirty-five feet of water crashing across flat coastland – They clocked the wind at over 140 miles per hour – and the devastation was absolute. Thousands of people died, and millions more were displaced. Now these homeless people are hungry and thirsty, and disease like the devil is lurking about to steal yet more of their souls.

Most climatologists agree, that Typhoon Haiyan is the largest recorded storm to make landfall. Ever. Think about that – larger than Isabel, larger than Sandy, larger than Katrina.

Superstorms – like the supersized tornado in Moore, Oklahoma earlier this year – 1.3 miles across – I've seen waterspouts swirling over the Atlantic Ocean, about a hundred yards offshore. They were perhaps, perhaps fifteen feet across. 1.3 miles.

Even the most prudent among us cannot but ask: **how**, *not whether*, climate change is related. Climate change – Now let's be honest. Talking about climate change makes some people nervous. It shouldn't. The question of climate change and its effects is not a political question, it is a scientific question. Is climate change related to these superstorms? To extreme droughts? To our own drought? Is the burning of fossil fuels to blame?

Maybe you've heard the little story of the disciple and her teacher: The disciple said, *I have no idea of what tomorrow will bring, so I want to prepare for it*. But the master answered, *You fear tomorrow – not realizing that yesterday is just as dangerous*. When it comes to climate change, the educated mind must ask, *is yesterday just as dangerous? What have we done?*

*Jesus warned about calamities: there will be wars and rumors of war. There will be famine and plagues. There will be dreadful portents and great signs in the heavens. But the end is not yet. Indeed, in a very ironic moment, Jesus warns that his followers will be tried in courts, and many will die – But – he says – *not a single hair on your head will be harmed*. You will be put to death, yet not a hair harmed, and when I think about the multitude of calamities since Jesus' time – the last in a long line of which is Typhoon Haiyan –

The explosion of Mt. Vesuvius, contemporaneous with Jesus' words. Jerusalem *was sacked* by the Romans in the year 70, and the Temple *was destroyed*. *Not one stone was left upon another ...*

The bloody crusades, Cambodia, Stalin's Soviet Union, world wars ... The question is not whether calamity or war will happen – the question is what will happen to you when it does?

Make up your minds, Jesus advises. When calamity strikes, when you are brought before courts... – *Make up your minds*. In other words,...*Don't be afraid*. It is as though Jesus is saying, fear is a choice you make.

Whether you are afraid in the day of calamity is a faith-choice you make. Don't be afraid. Now, most people of faith, Christian or otherwise, understand faith to be a matter of the heart – which it is – it is a yielding, a giving over of yourself –it happens inside – here –in the solar plexus.

Faith itself is not first about the brain, it is about the longitude of the heart. But faith in action is faith by choice. Once you have given yourself over to something - in the words of the twelve steps – to something greater than yourself – you stand fast. You endure. You make up your minds ...to stay there, in the orbit of God's watchful care.

The Temple of your world may be ransacked, may be crashing in around you. Perhaps you will even die - they may kill the body, but they cannot kill the soul –but you need not be afraid.

The Episcopal funeral service puts it like this: *whether we live or die, we are the Lord's possession*. *But it would be callous to suggest therefore, that the people of the Philippines –or anyone else in the midst of pain or tribulation - should simply trust – Or that the rest of us –knowing that yesterday may indeed come back to haunt us - That whether it is climate change or something else – the world just needs to adjust. God forbid! The Christian must never become cozy with human suffering.

And, there is only one valid position the Christian can take when it comes to the environment – God is creator – God created, is creating and continues to create –*The earth is the Lord's and all that is therein*.

The ground on which you stand is holy. I tell you – you can put the palm of your hand on a tree in Muir Woods, and *experience* eternal life –The earth is alive and it is holy. Which means: God is the *first and last* true environmentalist –and frankly, it doesn't matter whether you believe the scientists who say that the earth is warming and climates are changing –the prime Christian environmental ethic remains the same: leave holy earth like the boy scout campground – in better shape than you found it. You will hear cracks in trees, and trees will fall to the ground. Storms will rage around you. But stand firm.

First you yield – give yourself over - then you stand firm, and finally you act. Make up your minds.