

"God's Presence in the Storms"

The pictures are incredible, the devastation unfathomable. There is Market Street, deserted, awash in mud and debris. Boats litter the streets of Isle of Palms like a child's playthings carelessly thrown aside. The Ben Sawyer Bridge, which I have driven over so many times, is at odd angles to the water, no longer connecting land to land. Doors and roofs are gone. Houses are washed from their foundations. Cars sit in tall trees where the storm surge left them. Aerial photos show something like a war zone. It is hard for me to imagine that this was a reality for the people of the Lowcountry during Hurricane Hugo.

I was only a child when Hugo hit, growing up in Kentucky. As I recall, we had some bad weather as a result of the massive storm, even so far inland, but I can hardly relate to the stories I hear from those who survived the worst of it in this area. I ask myself, "What must that have been like? And what I would have done if I had been here? What if another big one hits now?" Since I have been here, every time the weather report tells of a possible hurricane forming in the Atlantic, I hear locals recall what happened over twenty years ago, and tell me that we are due for another "big one" anytime now. But in reality, no one can say with any certainty whether that will happen this year, or next year, or another twenty years from now. We just don't know.

I do believe, though, that if or when it happens, there are a few things we can count on to be true, just as they were then. Many of the stories I have heard from Hurricane Hugo survivors tell of people coming together to help one another through adversity. Yes, there were a few who tried to take advantage, driving up prices on necessary items or outright stealing. But there were many more who shared what they had with their neighbors, or who came from far away to bring help to complete strangers. Times of crisis often bring out the best in people somehow, and I believe that whenever the next storm, literal or figurative, comes into our lives, we can count on the kindness of fellow human beings. Another theme I heard running through many of the stories was survivors leaning on their faith. Prayer was a particularly important resource for countless people who felt helpless in the face of rising waters and the devastation that followed. They trusted that there was Someone greater than themselves whom they could call on, and their belief that God was listening and cared what they were going through was a source of strength in dark days. That is just as true for us today, whatever storms we may be facing.

God, when the winds are howling and the waters rising around us, our most primal instinct seems to be to call on you. Give us the strength we need when such times come, and help us to reach out to our brothers and sisters in harm's way as well. And forgive us when we forget to call on you during calmer days. We need your love just as much on those days, too. Thank you for always being here. Amen.

-- Chaplain Stacy N. Sergent

(This post originally appeared on September 21, 2009.)

"Life's Transitions"

About one year ago to the day (Oct 13, 2012) my oldest daughter called me, very excited, to say that she had just gotten engaged. I knew it was going to happen. Her boyfriend had spoken with me earlier in the week and their engagement was on the docket for that Saturday in a cornfield maze in Lexington, SC. What is interesting is the fact that I took that call about 10 minutes before I was getting ready to lead a wedding service for a couple at the Old Sheldon Church grounds located in the beautiful Lowcountry town of Yemassee, not far from Beaufort, SC. The timing of the call was perfect as I reflected on marriage, the covenant relationship between a couple, and how I was just plain happy for my daughter and her boyfriend - talk about life transitions! Engagement is a transition from singlehood to the prospect and plan for marriage. Both engagement and the marriage service itself are two important points in the transitional life stages of people. I felt like I had been tapped on the shoulder by God when my daughter called and that same tapping, metaphorically speaking, happened as the couple at Old Sheldon shared their vows. Surely God was in that place. I felt the holy hush that is the Spirit of God. It was God saying, "Pay attention, life is changing and it's good."

This month we are planning for the marriage of my daughter and her fiance who were engaged last year. How time flies! It has been both a long year and a short year. Her wedding day has been circled and transition is in the cards so to speak - transition from living at home with us sometimes to living with her husband and creating a home and enjoying life, work, and worship. I too feel the transition. She is leaving our family in one sense. She is establishing a covenant of love with her husband. It's a huge transition for us and for them. Yet, it feels good and it feels right. I am enjoying it for the most part, even if there is a bit of sadness with her leaving our home.

One other brief note of transition: My dad is in hospice care in Colorado. He has end-stage vascular dementia, among other medical challenges that are calling us to recognize and accept he is transitioning from this earth to a place where there is hopefully no pain and no illness and no tears. I don't know how many days or months he has to live, but I do know that the physicians believe his body is giving out. Yet, I am able to talk with him and he knows me some, and that is comforting and holy in the regard that that conversation will not always be possible. Life is transitioning for him and for me and our family.

Transitions are stressful, and they are incredibly holy and sacred. I cannot think of many things more transitional and meaningful than an adult daughter's marriage or a parent's medical challenges. Let me invite us to look at our transitions in life as fruitful possibilities for conversations and human connections that are markers that will forever be points and experiences that give great meaning to our journeys of life, work, and faith. One ancient writer said, "Love casts out all fear." That is so true. There is nothing to fear as we go through transitions. God is with us in the medical challenges that we face and in the beautiful transitions that happen in family life.

Lord, may we see your hand and work in all of life's transitions. May you touch our hearts to remind us when the sacred is right in front of us, and may we know the greatness of human love and divine love always. Amen.

-- Chaplain George M. Rossi

(This post originally appeared on October 12, 2013.)

"Sabbath"

"And God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it God rested from all his work that he had done in creation." - Genesis 2:3

Recently, as I did rounds on the various floors of the hospital, I asked a nurse how things were going on her unit. "We've had five new admissions tonight. I haven't had a break in hours," she responded quickly, before turning back to her computer screen. She looked very tired, but she said it with a confident smile, as if she were bragging. In our culture, where multitasking is such a prized skill and busyness is seen as a virtue, she very well may have been proud. Slowing down is seen as a weakness in such a fast-paced society.

Yet, in the Judeo-Christian scriptures, this is exactly what God did. God, the one and only, created everything that is, and then very deliberately set aside a period of time specifically for rest. Why? Did the Almighty really need a break? Perhaps. Or perhaps this was, like so many other things God does in holy writings, a teachable moment. It could be an example for us humans to follow. From the very beginning, God saw that in our ambitious drive to get ahead, we would overwork ourselves to the breaking point. By instituting the Sabbath, God was trying to build in a safeguard against that human tendency.

As Americans, we do not do Sabbath very well. Many of us work through our break times, don't take our vacation days, or spend our "days off" catching up on work at home, because there is just too much to be done. We applaud those who work sixty hours a week or more, instead of telling them they need to slow down. It is a dangerous mistake to ignore our need for rest and relaxation. Physically, it can lead to numerous health problems and sets us up for burnout. And perhaps most importantly, it points to a belief somewhere within us that we are too important for things to go on without us. "If I leave my desk for fifteen minutes, if I'm out of the office tomorrow, if I'm on vacation for a week, this place would fall apart," we seem to be silently saying. Surely if even God could take a day off, we can admit that we are not above the need to do the same.

God, thank you for not being ashamed to rest. We needed that example, though it is hard for us to follow sometimes. Give us the strength to be honest with ourselves and others about our own limits, and to take the time to take care of ourselves so that we will have something left to share with the world. Help us see the gift of rest. Amen.

-- Chaplain Stacy N. Sergent

(This post originally appeared on July 20, 2009.)

"Letting Go"

As a child, I loved autumn. Every October, our local elementary school held the Fall Festival. The classrooms where we usually learned spelling words and math problems were transformed into the Haunted House or the Fishing Pond or the Cake Walk. A favorite of my brother's and mine was always the General Store, where we could buy inexpensive toys, magic tricks, and the means to play practical jokes on one another for weeks to come. My parents would give an exasperated sigh when they saw us come out of the store carrying whoopee cushions, joy buzzers, disappearing ink, and the like. One year, my brother bought a colorful, woven tube just a few inches long.

"What's that?" I asked him.

"I'll show you," he said, smiling mischievously. "Put your fingers in both ends." I suspiciously, but obligingly, put one of my index fingers in each end of the tube. "Now, pull your fingers out," he snickered. I pulled, expecting to easily extract my fingers, but to no avail. My brother stood laughing as I tried, frustratingly, to get myself out of what he told me were "Chinese handcuffs." The harder I pulled, the tighter my fingers were wedged. Fortunately, a friend of mine, who had seen such an object before, came over to rescue me.

"You gotta quit pulling," she told me. "Just relax, and push your fingers together." I did so, and felt the circulation begin to return to my fingers. It was easy to get them out then, much to my brother's disappointment.

I have thought of that toy in recent days, when I find myself battling the stress of finances, work, and family. It feels sometimes as if I am trapped in the middle of it all, and the harder I try to get out, the more tightly I get myself wedged. I know that I need to relax, but it is not easy. I can agree with Arthur Burt, who said, "My greatest struggle is the struggle not to struggle." Day by day, I ask for God's help, and I try to "quit pulling" and trust God to help me through that day's struggles. This prayer by Peter Marshall is one that has resonated with me recently. Perhaps you will find something in it that speaks to your life as well.

Give me a calm and confident trust in Thee. Make me willing to live just one day at a time. May my heart re-echo to Thy promise that only as I rest in Thee can the desires of my heart be given to me. And now help me to do my part in placing a guard around my thoughts, by resolutely refusing to return to my old haunts of distrust. I thank Thee for Thy love for me and for Thy help. Amen.

-- Chaplain Stacy N. Sergent

(This post originally appeared on October 20, 2008.)

The Friendship from Animals: A True Gift from God

...he will be our friend for always
and always and always. 11

- Rudyard Kipling

"Until one has loved an animal a
part of one's soul remains unawakened. 11

- Anatole France

The above two quotes are taken from an animal sanctuary called "HowlMore" in the Columbia area. Here is their website: <http://www.howlmore.org>. The website and mission is connected with a former chaplain supervisor of mine. I really admire the work they do at HowlMore. It is so needed since every living creature, including humans, need a warm house, regular meals and good friendship.

The first quote above talks about friendship never ending: it is always in existence and never goes away, maybe not even in death. The second quote talks about the awakening of one's soul when one has loved a pet. Has your soul been awakened by the love of a pet animal? No doubt many of us can tell stories about our first pet dog or first pet cat or pet hamster. They are loving memories for many of us.

Today I hope this short meditational thought harkens you back to your favorite pet who has gone on to "dog or cat heaven" or maybe the pet is alive and you will be seeing him or her today. Surely their friendship is a gift from God. Psalm 8 says that humanity is made a little lower than angels and we as humans have the custodial and caring task of caring for the animals of our world as we are able to do so. May we do that well. After all, they usually take good care of us!

Dear God: Thank you for my past and present pets. They are all gifts who share friendship, love and presence. Help me and the rest of the human community to look out for them as they look out for me. Amen.

-- Chaplain George M. Rossi

(This post originally appeared on February 27, 2014.)

"A prayer of gratitude"

by speaker and author Oscar Motomura

"Thank you God for who I am.
Thank you for You,
For all living beings,
For the love I feel that makes me live
Every moment of my life with great joy,
Helping me bring joy
To all that my life touches.

Thank you God for the opportunities I have every day
To express the best I have in me,
For being able to be of service to every person I meet.

Thank you God for the perfect peace I feel inside,
Tranquility, serenity, Divine Quietness.
Thank you for everything I learn
From all I experience and all I create every day.

Thank you God for inspiring me,
For helping me create Heaven on Earth
Now, and now, and now,
And in every moment I think, speak, and act.

Thank you God
For being who I am.
Thank you,
Thank you,
Thank you."

"Happy Thoughts"

"We can do no great things, only small things with great love." -- Mother Teresa

On a shelf in my bedroom is a container a little bigger than a shoe box. It does not look terribly special, and often goes unnoticed as simply part of the decor. But this box is a treasure to me, what I call my "happy thoughts box." It is filled with letters, cards, drawings, small gifts, audio tapes, even some deflated balloons. All these were given to me by special people in my life. They are simple words and small deeds, but they have great significance to me. There are notes scribbled in crayon by children I have taught, saying things like, "Roses are red, violets are blue. You teach very well and that's why I love you!" A friend going through a time of personal crisis wrote, "Your friendship and love mean a great deal to me and have helped me get through the past months." A Christmas card from a Japanese student in one of my ESL classes said, "Thank you for teaching English. I'm very lucky girl." Some are simple things that bring a smile to my face, like a note from some dear friends whose dogs I often kept: "The dogs will be here Friday. Thanks so much. We love you!"

Some objects are mementos of acts of kindness. One card reminds me of the money I hadn't asked for (but certainly needed) sent by a relative when I was a poor college student. A warm letter makes me think of the friend who spent an afternoon cleaning my apartment when I was in bed with bronchitis, surrounded by mountains of used Kleenexes. The deflated balloons in the box were part of a surprise from my coworkers on my last day at a previous job. A worship guide from a chapel service floods me with memories of being part of that service alongside a wonderful friend of mine who died of cancer a few months later.

Recently I have had new objects to add to my box, bittersweet mementos of a tiny patient whose brief life touched mine and many others during his months here in the hospital. I have been grieving for him, as have many other staff members who cared for him, but I am also profoundly grateful to have known him and his family. No other child was more loved or more loving, and that love did not die. Every one of us who delighted in his smile or felt his tiny fingers wrapped around ours still carries the warmth of his love. The objects in my box are tangible reminders for me of the power of such love, the difference it has made in my own life, and what my love has done in the lives of others. Whether or not you have an actual box, it is important for all of us to have a place to keep such "happy thoughts," for the times when present circumstances pull us toward sadness. We need to be reminded then that we have loved and we are loved, a very happy thought indeed.

God, thank you for the people who love us. Give us eyes to see that love in the little things we take for granted every day. And most of all, thank you for loving us fully and unconditionally. Help us to hold on to that love when nothing else seems certain, and to pour our love into the lives of those around us. Amen.

-- Chaplain Stacy Sargent

(This post originally appeared on January 12, 2009.)

"Holiday Blues or Bliss"

The holidays bring a lot of things. The magic, delightful decorations, homemade pies, cakes with extra toppings -- and then the extra unwanted weight gain. Not to exclude annual family conversations, "the good, the bad and the ugly," which always seems to last longer than heartburn. So when the holidays are here, what do you do when you have experienced a loss during the past year? When a family member is serving in our military, and will not be home for holidays? Or what will you do when you realize the chair once filled is now empty, where last year, dad, mom, sister, brother, child, or spouse sat and this year that loved one is not here and not coming home?

Grief now fills the chair and your heart. The lights seem dimmer, tears replace laughter, boxes of decorations remain packed. A newborn nursery remains empty. One can wonder if constant sadness is normal, or "will I ever feel normal again?" These emotional roller coasters are indeed normal. A traditional name is grieving.

I am so sorry you have experienced a loss and are feeling overwhelmed and maybe out of place while others around you are joyfully celebrating. You do not need to apologize nor do you need to feel obligated to participate as usual. These are a few suggestions for you to take care of yourself this year. Plan ahead; be prepared for unexpected grief attacks or detours. Change the routine; offer to bring dinner rolls instead of your famous casserole. Purchase a special candle just for your loved one and light it when you think of them. Shop less, and make a memorial charity contribution (a good tax write-off). Keep things simple. Enjoy a good comedy and laugh out loud, even if it's not that funny. Keep breathing; the tide will change. Whatever way you choose to participate in the holidays to remember your loved ones, remember their laughter, smiles, stories, touch, the previous holidays they were with you. For new parents, when "hello means goodbye," your pain is also very real; whisper a gentle lullaby.

During the holidays, and very special days, give yourself permission to cry, laugh, participate or just to be.

God of compassion, we seek your comfort when we cannot be comforted. We seek your wisdom when we do not understand. We seek your peace when we are restless. We seek your presence when we are lonely. Amen.

-- Chaplain Lynn Brown Conklin

(This post originally appeared November 24, 2008.)

"Kensley's *Hesed*"

I will never forget my trip to North Carolina for my niece's third birthday. Though I only get to see her every few weeks now, during the first year of her life Kensley stayed with me for several hours almost every day. As I fed her, changed her diapers, sang to her, read to her, played with her, we developed a strong bond. When I walked into Kensley's birthday party this year, I immediately heard her excitedly yell, "Stacy's here!" She dropped the toy she was playing with and sprinted across the room to jump into my arms. Laughing, I hugged her tightly, so glad to be on the receiving end of this joyous greeting.

As adults, few of us would greet a loved one in quite this same fashion. For one thing, we would worry too much what other people would think of us. And even more importantly, we would be afraid of how our loved one would receive this display of affection. There is an underlying fear of rejection that often makes us hesitant to say or show how we really feel toward another. "What if he pulls away from my touch?" "What if she doesn't say she loves me too?" Such things did not go through Kensley's mind. The thought of my rejecting her would be unimaginable to her. She had complete trust that I would catch her when she jumped into my arms, and that I would be as happy to see her as she was to see me.

We often approach God with the same tentativeness that we would another person. We wonder how God will receive us. Will we be rejected? Can we trust God to love us, even when we have done things that make us feel unlovable? God desires us to approach with the same joyful abandon with which Kensley approached me, in the same spirit of trust. We can count on being accepted, no matter what, because God's very nature is Love. The Hebrew scriptures are filled with references to "*hesed*," a word with no good English translation. It is most often rendered as "loving kindness," "steadfast love" or "never ending love". This is not something God does, but the defining element of God's character. We can run to God knowing that we will always be welcomed with open arms.

O Thou who has ordered this wondrous world, and who knowest all things in earth and heaven: So fill our hearts with trust in thee that by night and day, at all times and in all seasons, we may without fear commit all that we have and hope to be to thy never/ailing love, for this life and the life to come ... Amen. (from "The Book of Worship")

-- Chaplain Stacy N. Sergent

(This post originally appeared on May 18, 2009.)

"Self-Giving Love"

If God is love, then what do we make of that? What if that is all there is to it? Simply - God is love. It isn't about me. It isn't about you. Not about my kingdom, your kingdom, or Mickey's. God is love. And that is it. Relax and take a Sabbath, rest in God. It is not about you, it is about God.

Please do not be offended by my thoughts, for I am not saying you are not important, remember you are the recipient of God's love. I am saying we are here to receive God's love and that could be our reason for being. You, me, and all of creation created for one simple purpose, to receive the love of God. We complicate this simple truth with our thoughts on heaven and hell, angels and demons, sexual orientations, skin color, denominations, scriptural interpretations, male or female, Jew or Greek, slave or free. Do not fret. These are all paths that most times divide and deliver us to a painful place. It is there in our pain that we start to understand our need. God grins and lovingly gives the very self of God to us. Eventually and eternally we are healed.

Look around at creation. There is so much need. God created a world that at every point is in need. Think about it, the one who is defined as "agape" love, self-giving sacrificial love created a world that provides never-ending opportunities for God to give the very self of God away. It seems that if God is love, the very nature of God is to give. It is God's nature to give the self of God to us. Here we are and we are in need of someone to be with us in our brokenness. Maybe this is our reason to be here. We are the beloved of our lover, God. Receive God's gift-the Holy God who is love desires to love you.

God, I do not seek brokenness, but when I am broken, I thank you that you run to me instead of running away. You join me in my brokenness. Give me the eyes to see and the ears to hear you in these days. In your loving name I pray. Amen

-- Chaplain Terry Wilson

(This post originally appeared on February 9, 2009.)