

Thought to ponder at the beginning:

Times of great calamity and confusion have been productive for the greatest minds.

The purest ore is produced from the hottest furnace.

The brightest thunder-bolt is elicited from the darkest storm.

– Charles Caleb Colton

Chalice Lighting

Just Now. W. S. Merwin

In the morning as the storm begins to blow away
the clear sky appears for a moment and it seems to me
that there has been something simpler than I could ever
believe

simpler than I could have begun to find words for
not patient not even waiting no more hidden
than the air itself that became part of me for a while
with every breath and remained with me unnoticed
something that was here unnamed unknown in the days
and the nights not separate from them
not separate from them as they came and were gone
it must have been here neither early nor late then
by what name can I address it now holding out my thanks

Reading: *Sleep and Prayer*, Bailey White (*Mama Makes Up Her Mind*)

One rainy fall evening Sophie, my fundamentalist Christian cousin, careened into our yard in her Volkswagen Beetle and told us that there was a hurricane watch out for our whole county.

She was excited. It might be the closest thing to Armageddon she would ever see. She stayed just long enough to tell us what to do, then she scratched off to prepare herself.

I took all the precautions. I filled the bathtubs with water, put buckets under all the leaky spots in the roof, closed all the doors and windows, and turned on the radio.

The watch was upgraded to a warning, the wind began to scream, and we could see the tops of the long-leafed pine trees doing a mad dance against the black sky.

The dog and I plastered ourselves like cardboard cutouts up against a bearing wall in the middle of the house. But my mother, who is not afraid of anything, tottered out to her little bed on the screen porch as usual with her cup of Ovaltine and *Young Men in Spats*, by P. G. Wodehouse.

“I’ll come in if it gets too bad,” she said.

It did get bad. The wind sounded like a train coming through a tunnel, and every minute or so I could hear a snap, a crack, and a crash as another tree went down.

About midnight I decided I had to go check on Mama. Clinging to the walls like a terrified roach, I made my way through the house and opened the door to her porch just a crack.

Her quilt had been blown off the bed and was sucked up against the screen. There she lay, like a lizard on a fan blade; the tattered sheet clutched under her chin.

“Oh no,” I thought, “she’s too terrified to move. I’ll encourage her.”

I crawled along the floor toward her bed. As I got close, I could hear above the yowling wind and crashing trees her steady and sonorous snore.

The next day it was all over. Hundreds of trees were toppled in the woods, and our big black-walnut tree was down in the backyard, but not one had touched the house.

Mama came out and built a little fire on the ground and started peeling apples. I climbed through the tops of fallen trees the mile and a half to my cousin’s house. It took two hours to get there.

Sophie was sitting on a tree limb, wringing her hands, and crying. And it was a pitiful sight. Her yard was like a giant wagon wheel, with her house as the hub. Every tree that could reach the house – eight in all – had fallen on it.

She climbed her way back home with me and told us about it while Mama dished up applesauce and hoecake. “All night I kneeled by the bed and prayed,” Sophie sobbed. “And every time I’d say amen, Bap, another tree would hit the roof.”

Mama gave her a big dollop of applesauce.

People say it was the worst hurricane to hit here since 1941. We didn’t have electricity for almost a month. But we got enough money selling the trees that had blown down to pay for a whole new roof for our house.

My cousin moved in with us while she decided what to do about her place. She ended up having the whole thing bulldozed into a little pile, and then she moved to Atlanta.

I know it’s not a good idea to make generalizations about theological issues, but for some people at least, I’m pretty sure sleep is more effective than prayer.

Last week I had the opportunity to trot out one of my favorite essays: *Be Cool to the Pizza Dude*, by Sarah Adams. This week, I have had the pleasure of presenting another one of my favorite essays: *Sleep and Prayer*, by Bailey White.

Actually, I love the entire book from which I pulled the Bailey White essay: *Mama Makes Up Her Mind*. Many years ago, when I was recovering from a catastrophic pregnancy loss that involved life-threatening hemorrhaging, and resulting anemia that left me confined to the couch for many hours and days as I rebuilt my blood supply, one of my friends brought me *Mama Makes Up Her Mind* to help me heal. That book helped a bereft and depressed young woman laugh again, and I have never forgotten it. I cannot even describe what that gift meant to me at the time.

As to *Sleep and Prayer*, here we are in hurricane season. I am not aware of any active hurricanes at the moment – and, usually, hurricanes are not too much of a threat here in Maine. We did cancel church one Sunday when Hurricane Irene blew through in 2011. It was just a few months after our church fire as you may recall, if you were here at the time.

Here's what I remember about Irene:

- (a) I officiated at an outdoor wedding that weekend. Some of the guests couldn't make it because their flights were canceled.
- (b) the church spent \$6000 to shore up our teetering, burnt out building just so that it wouldn't fall over in the high winds. We hadn't yet decided to tear the building down, so we had little choice but to be prudent and responsible citizens in the circumstances.
- (c) Irene actually headed inland, leaving Brunswick relatively unscathed but causing terrible flooding damage in western Massachusetts and Vermont.

But, let's not forget: Everyone experiences metaphorical hurricanes – those times when the wind of fate shred the people or things we value most, leaving us to pick up the damage left in the storm's wake, even while our hearts are in tatters. Deaths, terrible illnesses, loss of careers and/or abilities, addictions, natural disasters. Wars, the tides of political mayhem that wreak havoc on the lives of people and the planet. Oh, we have our hurricanes – even here in Maine – the times in our lives when we have no control over the storm that's coming and all we can do is to batten down the hatches and, maybe, pray ... and then pick up the pieces.

I'd like to think I could snore my way through a fierce hurricane. I'd like to think I'd hunker down on my cot on the screen porch with my cocoa and my book, only to emerge from my cocoon in the morning to rustle up some applesauce over an outdoor fire. I actually love a good storm. Even so, I think I'm a different kind of Mama than Bailey White's Mama. I suspect that in the end I'd be more like Bailey, inching my way along the wall to check on things.

I'd even be more like Sophie, terrified and praying. I'm pretty sure my way of praying and my expectations of praying would be a lot different from Sophie's though. So let's look at the idea of praying.

Where hurricanes and weather in general are concerned, people lean on ministers a lot.

“Can't you do something about this weather?” my neighbors have been asking me lately.

They tell me they figure I have a clearer channel than most people do to the Great Weatherman in the Sky. They are joking. They are also wrong. I have no clear channel to anything.

Actually I love prayer. I love it as a way to center and focus my energy, to connect to my heart of hearts, to regroup and remember my highest purposes, to humble myself in the face of the Great Mystery, and, yes, to speak out my sorrows or worries or disappointments – and my joys and wonder, too.

But to present a laundry list of my personal desires? No.

I find the whole notion of a God that metes out rewards and punishments abhorrent. Countless good people have prayed fervently only to watch their tiny babies die, their homes consumed by fire, flood, or war, their neighborhoods riddled with crime, their lives uprooted by the urgent need to flee their homelands in the face of life-threatening circumstances. And countless scurrilous people have enjoyed a life of comfort and ease.

I want no part of a theology that contains even a whiff of a suggestion that God hands out blessings and curses like that. Instead, I accept the chaos and randomness of life, and I pray for the strength, wisdom, and courage to face whatever comes. If there is a God who listens and comforts, good. If there isn't, *the very act* of praying brings me strength.

There is a real danger to the thinking that God rewards the righteous and punishes the unworthy: When things go well, it's way too easy to think God is on your side, endorsing your viewpoint, rewarding your obvious virtue. It's way too easy to become self-righteous and unquestioning. Conversely, when things go poorly, it's way too easy to pore over every detail of your life – or someone else's life – to find the wrong words or actions that incurred God's wrath. Too easy to blame yourself for your bad fortune or someone else for theirs. Too easy to blame the victim.

About a month ago, the *Washington Post* published an article called, “Judgment Days,” by Stephanie McCrummen. The article appeared on their religion page. The subtitle of the article was: “In a small Alabama town, an evangelical congregation reckons with God, President Trump and the meaning of morality.”

The reporter, Stephanie McCrummen, visited First Baptist Church in Luverne, Alabama, to explore, on a local level, the phenomenon of stratospheric approval ratings (currently around 77%) for President Trump among white evangelical Christians. She spent time with both the pastor, Clay Crum, and the parishioners at First Baptist.

When she arrived, Pastor Crum was in the middle of a sermon series about the Ten Commandments. That particular Sunday, he was taking up Commandment #7, “Thou shalt not commit adultery.”

Stephanie McCrummen writes: *“He (Pastor Crum) prayed about what he was going to do. He was the pastor of First Baptist Church in the town of Luverne, Ala., which meant he was the moral leader of a congregation that overwhelmingly supported a president who was an alleged adulterer.”*

What would Pastor Crum do? Would he address that moral dilemma in his sermon?

During the previous week, McCrummen had spent time interviewing parishioners.

One woman, Sheila, felt angered by the new Legacy Museum and the National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Montgomery, Alabama, both of which expose the history of lynching in America and honor lynching victims.

The museum and memorial: *reminded her of a time when she was a girl in Montgomery, when the now-famous civil rights march from Selma was heading to town, and her parents, fearing violence, had sent her to the country to stay with relatives.*

“It’s almost like we’re going to live that Rosa Parks time again,” she said, referring to the civil rights activist. “It was just a scary time, having lived through it.”

She thought an all-out race war was now in the realm of possibility. And that was where she had feared things were heading, right up until election night, when she and [her friend] Linda and everyone they knew were praying for God to save them. And God sent them Donald Trump.

“I believe God put him there,” Sheila said. “He put a sinner in there.” God was using Trump just like he had used the Apostle Paul, she said. “I think he’s being molded by God for the role. I think he’s the right man for the right time. It’s about the survival of the Christian nation.”

In contrast, Sheila and her friends believed President Obama and Hillary Clinton were “evil” and “of Satan.”

The people McCrummen interviewed, including Pastor Crum, all recognized the immorality of Trump's various actions and words, but they saw him as an immoral man doing moral things. Above all, they saw the hand of God in his election. And they saw their continued duty to be to pray for God to continue to work through Donald Trump.

In the end, Pastor Crum decided not to mention Donald Trump in his sermon about adultery. Stephanie McCrummen writes: *He looked out at all the faces of people who felt threatened and despised in a changing America, who thought Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton were sent by Satan to destroy them, and that Donald Trump was sent by God to protect them, and who could always count on Clay Crum to remind them of what they all believed to be the true meaning of Jesus Christ — that he died to forgive all of their sins, to save them from death and secure their salvation ... Not now, he decided. Not*

yet. He closed his Bible. He had one last thing to say to them before the sermon was over.

“Let us pray.”

“Amen,” someone in the congregation said.

Now I understand the moral dilemma of supporting a flawed candidate, of voting for someone, despite the wrongs they have done. I lived in Massachusetts when Ted Kennedy was Senator. I voted for him more than once, deploring some of his behavior but liking his politics. He usually voted the way I wanted him to. Despite his poor behavior in his personal life, I felt he represented me in his professional life. I understand what it is to live in an imperfect world and to make compromises, even with one's own morals, ethics, and values.

I also understand pastors have to consider their congregations when crafting messages. Pastor Crum is a better judge of his congregation than I am. I do not mean to judge him when perhaps he was right: maybe his congregation couldn't have heard a discourse on moral compromise just then.

But the idea that God elected Trump? Or that Satan was behind Obama or Clinton?

That thinking is downright dangerous, the seeds of self-righteousness that “others” the down and out, that blames those who suffer ill fortune for their own hardship, and that demonizes (literally!) those with opposing viewpoints.

Here's the truth as I see it: We live in a world of both good and bad fortune. If we are lucky, we will enjoy times of good health and emotional and financial security. But even if we live a life laden with good fortune, fate will have its way with us. No matter how righteous a life we may live, time will come when we suffer loss and heartbreak. None of that has anything to do with God's favoring or punishing us. When you're an imperfect, fallible creature living a finite life where you have little control over what happens, you will live through good and bad times. Sometimes you will need shelter in the storm, no matter how virtuous you are.

And prayer? For me, prayer helps me retreat temporarily from the tornado of activity that occupies many of my days so that I can marshal my resources, gain some peace and wisdom, touch my values in deeper ways, and find my way home to love, always.

Hurricanes will come. No amount of prayer will prevent them. But prayer helps me face them, live through them, and pick up the pieces when they're over.

Even if there is no God listening, even if there is no great force that prayerful words and intentions can influence, may we hold our hands out to one another, facing the battering winds together. Amen.

Benediction Let us pray: Deepest Mystery, source of creation, spirit of love, help us to keep our minds and hearts open, our words truthful, and our actions gentle. When the wind rises, may we remember our strength by reaching out to others. Amen.

