

“The Eye of the Storm”
December 18, 2022—Fourth Advent Sunday

Isaiah 9:2,6-7

As I watched the latest big storm cross the country, promising to give southern New England snow that did not materialize, I was reminded of some of the other storms I’ve lived through in my life. Whenever I think of big storms, there is one that always comes to mind. A couple of years after I graduated from college, I was sitting in my office in a small social service agency in Washington, DC. It was getting towards the middle of the afternoon and things were beginning to wind down for the day.

All of a sudden, I glanced quickly around the office because it seemed like someone had turned out all the lights. I walked over and looked outside the window and the skies were ominously dark. Outside it was eerie and hushed...the kind of backdrop you might have if you were filming a gothic horror movie.

Then the wind started. But it didn’t start slowly. In an instant, the wind picked up speed and began making a loud noise. Much like the noise a fan makes when you turn it from “off” to “high” without stopping at “low” or “medium.” Soon the wind began whipping through the trees and I saw something that amazes me to this day. A heavy, green, metal dumpster filled with trash began to literally float across the parking lot as if it was in an air hockey game. The dumpster gathered speed and didn’t stop until it crashed into the brick wall on the other side of the driveway. I’ve been in a few big storms in my life, but I haven’t since seen a storm that caused dumpsters to fly.

The wind howled and the windows in the office shook and the trees outside bent back and forth. The whole thing was mesmerizing and I couldn’t pull myself away from the window. However, a short time later, without warning, the wind ceased. The noise died down. The skies even cleared up enough for the sun to crawl out from behind a set of clouds. I didn’t realize it at the time, but I was somewhere in the place meteorologists call, “the eye of the storm.

A few short minutes later, the wind increased and the storm started again in earnest. By the time the storm was over, fallen trees littered the DC area, power blacked out across the city, a few people were trapped in their cars and high winds caused extensive damage. Weather forecasters labeled the storm a “down thrust.” To me, it looked and felt a lot like a tornado.

I imagine a number of you have lived through storms of similar intensity. Ten years ago, in the middle of a dark night, “Superstorm Sandy” generated a similar eerie, ominous feeling for many of us right here in South Windsor. Really big storms are awesome and sometimes scary and easy to remember in vivid detail. But you get a totally different feel when you’re right in the center of the storm. When there’s a quiet lull long enough for you to catch your breath, and the eye of the storm passes overhead. A storm’s eye is a unique place in the world where “all is calm” and “all is bright.”

“Silent night, holy night. All is calm, all is bright. Christmas is a lot like being in the eye of a storm. Especially when we’re talking about the birth of Jesus Christ. We love to picture that holy night and romanticize that Nativity scene in particular ways. The star shining brightly. The shepherds kneeling reverently alongside their sheep. The kings arriving with precious gifts. Joseph keeping watch over Mary. And Mary maintaining her own personal vigil over the manger and her son Jesus. In our imaginations, it’s a quiet scene. There might be angelic music playing in the background, but all in all, it’s a peaceful, tranquil tableau.

Yet, we cannot forget that Jesus was born into the center of a stormy world. In fact, the storms had been raging for many years, long before Jesus arrived. Think about the storm that covered the earth with water for forty days and nights because God didn’t like the unfaithfulness God saw across the human world. Noah and an ark full of animals braved that storm. But as the wind blew and the waters rose steadily, that storm must have been a frightening spectacle.

Generations later, Pharaoh felt the storms rage when God sent plagues upon his Egyptian people prior to Moses leading the Israelites out of slavery. Later still, Jonah got caught in a storm so intense that a great fish came along and swallowed him whole before the storm completely swept him away. Powerful, violent, raging storms had been an inevitable part of God’s world from the beginning.

And the storms kept on occurring well beyond the birth of Jesus. Not long after the Nativity, King Herod sent word to his soldiers to kill all the children under two years of age living in and around Bethlehem. It may have been Jesus’ world. But it was still a stormy world. As Jesus grew up and walked the countryside teaching, preaching and healing, storms stalked him around every corner. Then some thirty-four years later, an angry crowd stormed Pilate’s palace courtyard and shouted for Jesus’ blood. Mere hours later, Jesus died on the cross on a stormy Good Friday afternoon.

But on the night Jesus Christ was born, the eye of the storm passed right over the top of the Bethlehem stable. For a short time, the ancient world was able to catch its breath and all was, in fact, calm and bright. The storms raged before and the storms would rage after, but for a short time, the storm ceased...and a holy child was born.

In the midst of our stormy world, each of us has gathered in this holy sanctuary on this holy Sunday. We are well aware of the storms all around us...the violence and the pain and destruction that precede us into this place. We know about the war that continues to rage in Ukraine. We know about the storm named “Ian” that leveled the homes and communities of so many of our fellow citizens to our south. We are aware of the storm that homelessness and hunger and poverty and mental illness cause in the lives of so many men, women, children and families. And we have a sense of the destructive storms that addiction can cause in the lives of those who are addicted and their loved ones.

All these big storms in our world are scary and awesome. These storms are etched in our minds in vivid detail. And we know that more storms are on the way. As much as we might hope and pray for the day when no storms lurk on the horizon, the truth is that we are a long way from taming some of the major storms that face us. Sooner than we would choose, the storms will be upon us again in full force, wreaking their peculiar and devastating havoc.

We can't forget about our stormy world on this Christmas Sunday. A warm fire, a glass of eggnog or mulled wine, and some carols playing in the background might help us block out the storms temporarily. Nevertheless, the storms aren't going away...

But the story of the birth of Jesus Christ tells it like it was. On the night Christ was born, there was peace and calm in the world. It wasn't a peace and calm removed from the conflict and suffering and pain of the world. It was a peace and calm like the lull in the eye of a storm. The kind of peace and calm that comes out of nowhere without any warning. The sort of peace and calm that passes all human understanding.

What's more, the story of the birth of Jesus Christ tells it like it is. The storms outside our church doors are fierce and they will not quit. But God continues to speak and God continues to do God's work. And just to prove it, God has brought us to this place on this occasion and set us right in the eye of the storm. To witness something so wonderful and so peaceful that it will exceed our human comprehension.

So, we sing carols and tell the old story and light candles and spread good cheer with our families and friends. Our amazing God who is before us and after us and among us and within us will be born to us on Christmas Day. When all is calm and all is bright. Amen.

