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Eye of the Storm

by May Bente Stuart Matre

Prayer:

Risen Lord, come and stand among us
Awaken us to your presence,
Open us to the gate of glory,
Show us the path of life
Help us to know you are with us now and always.

INNLEDNING

“In the eye of the storm” That’s what I have been asked to talk to you about, these two days; today and tomorrow. And, though the topic is challenging, I have to admit it was the title “In the eye of the storm” that made me say yes to do this! English is not my first language, and it is maybe not for all of you either, so we have to pray that the Holy Spirit will help us with the language!

Think it is because I have spent so much time in my life listening to people in all different kinds of storms. People, who have lived miserable lives because there was no one there to protect them or care for them when they were children, people who has been neglected, abused and mistreated. Their lives have been a kind of continuous dealing with storms. People I have met in psychiatric institutions and in jail.

But I have also met a lot of people living more ordinary life’s and then, slowly or dramatically, find themselves in storms. They do not know how to survive it, - or not even how to find a little rest, or peace, to go further on. For many years I have also listened to Christian people, who find themselves in storms. In times of storms the question that often are coming up is: “Where is God now?” Sometimes he feels like gone with wind...Or the question that can be even harder to deal with: «Is it God who sends me the storm?» To be in a storm, having a faith in God, arise some questions that sometimes increase the fear and the feeling of being lost in forces they can’t control.

Of course, there have been storms in my own life too. I have had to struggle with all these questions. And the longer I live, the more convinced I am, that we all – once or many times – have to deal with storms. The question is not IF, but WHEN the storm comes.

“In the eye of the storm” What does it mean? When I prepared this topic, I “googled” pictures of this phenomenon. The metaphor is from the structure of a tornado. You can see a picture of it on your paper. This kind of storm is characterized by its extremely strong wind. It has forces that can destroy buildings, cars and people. But I was overwhelmed, and impressed, by how it was possible to see the eye in the center of the storm. There is a totally

calm place, free from dark clouds and wind. And it is almost unbelievable how much it looks like a real eye.

When storms arise outside of us, and there is nothing we can do to escape it, we will often fight against it. We will try to get back to the place we were before the strong wind threw us away from all that felt safe. We resist, we fight, we struggle... But what we often do not know is that there is this calm place within it. In addition, we do not know how to get in there, for some rest, for some comfort, - for some feeling of being seen by someone stronger than we are, stronger than the storm! It is so important to find this place, for the frightening thing is that there is no other way out of the storm than through it.

In strange and often surprising ways, I do believe that it is in this center we can get what we need to get out there again.

WORK

For some of you who sit here with us today, I guess you have felt like being in a storm to get here. I guess most of you have had a really busy time preparing for coming here. You, who have the responsibility for the arrangement, have had a lot of work getting ready for this.

And, like the most of us who are working with human beings there are times when we feel like being in a storm. We do not know the way out and not the way into the center. People needs us, things have to be done faster than we can keep up with. Many people get burned out of stress. In this case I think we can learn from the life of Jesus. He was meeting people everywhere. He talked to them, he rose them up and he healed them. Even though he could do so much for so many people he regularly left them to be alone to seek his father`s eye.

It is often in the most busy times we do not even think we can spend any time at all in silence, in prayer. A wise man said that "Today have so much to do that I will not spend my ordinary our in pray, I will spend two. It is these days I really need it most!"

Before we continue this issue I would like to give you a little exercise. It is an example on taking a little time in the center of the "Working-storm." The best thing is to spend some days in silence and retreat, but if that is not possible one can spend some ours. But as we will see in this exercise it is possible to spend some minutes. And I think it makes a difference! Some minutes to meditate a text from the Bible, to breathe deeply, tell the Lord how it is to be you right now. And listen to what he whispers to you.

Can be a meditation like this: I read it. Feet on the floor, Breath deep. Eyes resting on a spot or closed. I will read it and you will have some minutes to be in the text.

JESU STORM

In a way, I think Jesus, *God incarnated*, is a genuine picture for how to be taken in a storm, reaching the eye and be thrown out again in the chaos of the mighty forces that we are all threatened by. As we can read in the Philippians 2.6: "Who being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant. Being born in human likeness."

" What a storm! From being God - to take the very nature of a servant! From being God - to lie in the hay in the stable. Totally depending a young girl, in a world that was haunting him from his birth. He has been a vulnerable baby that had to be lift from the dirty floor, being breast-fed and nourished by his mother`s love. As we all need to be.

He has been a refuge in the Middle-east like thousands of human being are today. He has been in the power-full storms on the sea in a small boat. He has been met with distrust, lies and bullying. His friends let him down and left him, and he was crucified like a simple criminal. He has really tried the storms of human beings!

Through all this Jesus seeks to the eye of the storm, a quiet place where he can find his Fathers eye. On the mountain, in the desert or in the garden. Quite places where he can be alone be calm. Let the voices of the needing world rest. Sometimes he really needed to escape from the people to reach this place.

I think the hardest storm Jesus met during his time as a human being was the evening when he knew the tornado was on its way. Judas had already left to betray him. He was waiting for the heavy suffering that his body, his soul and his spirit should be torn by. What does he do?

He goes to the garden to seek his Fathers eye. What happens? He asks God to drop the last unbearable storm that was blowing up. Like we all do! He declares his deep-felt wish to be saved from this storm very loud and clearly. The three disciples that he needed to support him by praying with him must have heard this before they fell asleep. But though he asked this cup, or this storm, to pass by he is all the way also clear that it is God that has to stop the storm - if it is to be stopped. In Luke 22.42 can we read: «In his anguish he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling own on the grown."

Anyone of us who have prayed for a beloved child in danger, in fear of a serious diagnose, for being betrayed or let down, or have feared to drown, or get lost in the forest in the thunders-storm, - we all know how hard we try to make God let the cup or the storm pass by us!

Nevertheless, when Jesus had been in the eye of the storm he knew that there was no other way than through it. And he had got what he needed for the storm, that was not only against human suffering, but a storm that involves forces of life and death, light and darkness, good

and evil. Maybe Jesus did not know, in his human nature, the full meaning and value of going into this overwhelming storm. But he did! And that's why Paul can say in the letter to the Hebrews, Chapter 4.14:

"Since, then, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weakness, but we have one who in every aspect has been tested as we are, but without sin."

Well, Jesus had his storm and his trials. But how can it be that so many of us feel alone, left behind and betrayed when the storm hit us? Can it be because there are some images of God that are so deeply rooted in us, that when reality gets too far away from these images, we feel the gap between what we thought life would be and what it has become has lost connection with each other?

WHEN LIFE BURSTS THE IMAGE OF GOD

When the storm comes it often feels like things are falling apart. Life keeps throwing us into situations, gives us experiences that do not fit with the images we had. We have no coping-strategies for the storm.

The almighty, good, protective God – Life-experience is He does not save me when I need it

Sooner or later most people experience struggle with this image of God. There is so much suffering, and so many storms in this world that even if the storm never hits you, it should trouble us that so many innocent people are hit. And the earth itself is in a storm because of the climate crises.

However, for most of us the storm comes. Somebody close and beloved dies, accidents happens, serious physical or mental illness, abuse and discrimination, storms/hurricane who destroy homes and people etc

If your faith is based on the imagination of a God sending angels to protect us if we keep our part of the deal with him, like; being good, helpful to others, avoid sin or at least regret and ask for forgiveness immediately, - then we expect to be blessed! And if I am blessed God will be my good shepherd, and like on the glossy pictures children get in Norway, his angel will prevent children from falling off the cliff. Or like Jesus did in the gospels, he will come and calm the storm, take my hand and get me safe back home.

But when the storm hits many of us will, despite we pray on our knees begging for help and protection, we will still find ourselves in a desperate situation. Then it is easy to interpret it as if God is permitting the storm. As a result some of us become very confused. Is God angry at me? I begin to analyze, - what can the reason be? We often think we must have done something wrong. Like Jobs friends said to Jobs meaningless suffering. They said: «You must hide something that you have done that makes God punish you like this!»

The many promises God gives in the Bible about protecting us, the images of the strong God who is master of everything that happens in the world is deeply challenged in the storm! As an example, I remember a divorced mother. She goes to Christian meetings when her daughters are visiting their father. Then it turns out that he is sexually abusing them when she is there. She is praying and worshipping at the same time as her daughters are being sexually abused in the worst way. For her is the experience that Gods betrayal is as bad as her x-husbands. She felt like Job says in Chapter 9.17-18: "For he crushes me with a storm (tempest) and multiplies my wounds without cause. He will not let me get my breath, but fills me with bitterness."

As Magnus Malm, a well-known Christian Swedish author writes;" Experience of God`s betrayal can become the deepest wound in life! How ca we relate to this disappointment?

How can we deal with this?

Faith put on trial will sometimes day because it was built on assumptions that did not hold when the storm and the hard days come. Like the house built on sand. We simple lose faith.

For others the only modifies it. Many of those ending up with a distant "Sunday God" are people who have become disappointed. In this way they are trying to protect themselves from hope that will not be fulfilled. In such a case they will avoid disappointment. But they will not be able to experience Gods healing presence either.

Nevertheless, we find a number of examples in the Bible of a third way to relate to disappointment, for example like Job did. He presented a daring message: Pour your grief unto Him! Also your anger, your doubt, your bitterness, your betrayal and your feeling of ben betrayed, your broken heart and your disappointment!

But do not let go of him! Cling to him and struggle with him like Jacob did. People who dares this struggle very often come out of it with a faith that does not depend on external circumstances. **This is a faith that can not be shaken; this faith is a result of having been shaken!** Meeting people with such a faith leaves a deep impression, and is often very strengthening for one`s own faith!

The solidary God

I believe that for those who dare this struggling with God. For those who dare to do like the old spiritual –guiding tradition recommend: keep the conversation alive! Be honest. Let him know the truth about how you feel, what you need and what you cannot take anymore! Those will experience that God will not fail them! Many of us need a lot of courage to speak this way to God. However, I think this is the way to find the eye of the storm.

In this eye, Jesus shows us another image of God: Jesus shows us a God that identifies himself with us. This is a God who has suffered in all kind of storms himself and because of that he can stand with us united in a deep and strong solidarity. For all who struggles with

the suffering of life I find this image the most comforting and strengthening. Jesus, true God and true human, the mystery of God on its edge, he identifies with everyone who is struggling and suffering. I will give you an example from the hard circumstances from Auschwitz:

In the center of the camp they had built gallows. A young boy was to be hanged. The boy was so small that the rope did not tighten enough to kill him instantly. The boy was hanging there for a long time. It was a horrifying experience for those watching. One of those standing there asked one of them he knew had a faith in God: "Where is your God now?" And the believer answered: "He is hanging there." In suffering, humiliation and death: in the eye of the storm he shows us solidarity. He has been there in his human nature and he will forever stay with the suffering people after his resurrection!

As a young man, who had been sexually abused by a priest said: "It makes all the difference in the world to know Jesus is the one being abused and not the abuser? Then I had the strength and the courage to stand up for myself thrusting that God did not want this to happen." And he rose from the comforting and strengthening eye in the storm, when he really had this deep knowledge of Jesus suffering with him, and he went on forward out there again to fight his way through it.

When other people causes the storm

Like in these examples I have mentioned above, I think some of the hardest things to deal with is the evil, the harm and the neglect we meet from other people. That's why war, violence, rape, mistreating or bullying and neglect take us into storms that also affect some of the most basic human qualities. Like our ability to trust other people and our ability to build nourishing and life-bringing relationships with others. This kind of storms, which is not accidents, not natural-disasters, but caused by other human beings can make us feel totally extradited and without any kind of protection in life. Being unable to protect ourselves, and not even our children, is so damaging and so threatening, that I think it is the hardest storm we can be hit by. Our vulnerability meeting other people's evil is devastating for the most of us. But some of us are able to, even in these cases, to find the eye in the storm that helps them to survive and stand strong through the storm.

First of all I will remind us about Jesus. He died in the hands of other people's will. We killed him. He has been there! Meeting other people's evil! He has been isolated from all his friends and all the people who had been healed, fed and inspired by him. He has felt abandoned by human beings.

And he has shared the deepest pain of all, he felt abandoned also by God. Like also we so often do, when everything is taken from us. Jesus has given voice to the deepest and most painful scream of all human beings: **"My God, my God why have you forsaken me?"**

There is no place the storm can take us to where Jesus has not already been. Therefore, he can always say to us who are trembling in the storm: "I have been there, I can sympathize with you – and most important – I am with you right now."

But when the storm rages it is hard to hear anything, to see anything or to know anything for sure. So the biggest struggle is to fight our way to the eye.

THE EYE

Under all kind of circumstances we have to seek the quiet place. On the mountain, in the desert, in the garden – or sometimes the only possible place- seek the place in our own heart. This is the place Jesus has promised to stay. This is the place where we can pray, keep the conversation alive, - we have to keep the conversation with God alive - even if it is only a scream or a groan. Our heart is the place where we can recognize not only his words, but his voice. And the paradox is that what he says is often not what we want to hear in the storm, like: "I will save you and calm the storm." (Sometimes, thanks God, he also say that). He can say that because he is almighty, he can still do miracles, - but his kingdom is still not of this world.

But what he always says, what he said and keep saying to us all is: "Be not afraid." "Peace be with you" and "I am with now and forever." This voice assures us that he has not left us, that his eyes are watching over us. And that there is a reality that is above the reality we know. Where storm comes, wars are being fought, discrimination of all kinds exists. I think the eye of the storm reminds us of the place above this place.

I want to read this meditation written by Haldis Reigstad. Here we find this genuine combination of God suffering, but his stubborn will to love us for all times. And his promise to Return..

Dikt: Jesus spørsmål og tilbakekomst!

I will come back and bring you home

Jesus said to his disciples in the gospel of John. 14.1-4:

"Do not let your hearts be troubled. Thrust in God, thrust also in me. In my father`s house, there are many rooms. If it were not so, then I would have told you. And if I go to prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you with me that you also may be where I am."

If the only dimension we had, when being in the storm, was that the storm would calm - and we will go safe back to our homes and live twenty, thirty of forty years more, we would all still be waiting for the last and biggest storm: our death! Where will that storm take us? How can we prepare for it?

I believe that what the eye of the storms we have on earth really will show us is that in a deep and profound way the storm has already been overcome by Jesus. He has showed us where we all belong. We are his brothers and sisters and belong in our Father's house.

The vision of heaven has given hope for human beings in all kinds of storms. Some of the most beautiful music that is created is in the light of this conviction. The hope we share that there will be a new heaven and a new earth. And there; God himself will dry all our tears away – and we will finally get to see Him as He really is!

Avslutning

Today I have focused on the storm that hits us from “outside ourselves:” Tomorrow I will focus more on the different kind of storms that arises inside of us.

Today I hope you will remember this one thing: Keep the conversation alive! Cling to him!

To find the eye in the storm is so important because we can be assured that Jesus know all the way what we are going through. He know it because he has felt it on his own body. He identifies and sympathize with us. And he remained us that the storm is on a deeper level already overcome.

There will be a dawn, a new world; a safe place is waiting for us in the end. I have met some people, who have been in the worst storms in life, they have been tortured and mistreated, but they are the most peaceful, calm and loving persons I have ever met. Why? As they say: I knew that the only thing they could take was my life. And my life is already given to God. So even if I live or die I am in his hands. I live here on earth as long as I can, but then I will live forever and be united with the one I have always longed for.”

Before we finally end today I will give you a little meditation, a little prayer.

Diktet:

Keep going my Child, do not give up,
Soon the light breaks through!
My eye is watching over you,
until you have found your way home.

In my heart there are many rooms.
And one is only yours.
In your room you are always safe.
You my beloved child!

Haldis Reigstad