

I Found Safety in the Storm

BEFORE SHE REACHED US, HURRICANE ISABEL HAD GAINED A REPUTATION AS ONE OF THE WORST STORMS IN YEARS. ONLY TIME WOULD TELL JUST HOW PREPARED WE REALLY WERE.

My husband and I live in the middle of a land teeming with history. The lush, old northern Virginia earth boasts battles and scars and blood and tears.

Historic trails echo the footfall of some of our nation's finest. It was in this lovely corner of the world that we were thrown into our own battle of sorts.

Hurricane Isabel came unwelcome and uninvited. The harbingers of news and weather had elevated her to near-celebrity status, carefully policing her immediate location, velocity and projected path. This was my first hurricane; my husband, John, was the seasoned one.

When it became evident that she was definitely destined for our little town, we began initial preparations. We moved all our lawn furniture and garden gear inside. We gathered flower pots, stone containers, patio paraphernalia, even my little red wagon—no, especially my little red wagon (the one with detachable side slats and a finish so shiny that it makes you want to grab your sister and haul mud pies around the backyard)—and ushered them all into the basement.

I cleared the area around the sycamore we'd affectionately named Moe the Survivor. (Yes, we name the trees we plant as well as any creatures that frequent our wooded lot.)

We labeled him a survivor because he'd appeared dead before our moving him from Tennessee following a drought. A mere stick in the ground at that time, he had blossomed the year after John transplanted him in Virginia.

In the early days of our marriage, Moe became our mascot in a way, and we'd often paralleled his uprooting, struggle and ultimate burgeoning with our own. Moe mattered to us.

AWAITING THE TEMPEST The winds began early in the morning on the day of the storm. The trees in the backyard made the most wonderful sounds—as though they were taking a defensive position and finalizing their game plan.

We stayed outdoors much of the day and kept our doors and windows open as long as we could, savoring the lush symphony and monitoring the growing ferocity. We weren't really sure what would happen, but we knew the night would be a long one.

We prayed throughout the day. In the early afternoon our electricity failed.

It didn't blink or stutter; it just seemed that someone turned off the master light switch. Skilled campers that we are (not!), we readied the Coleman lantern, turned on the transistor radio (are they still called that?) and settled in.

As night fell, the winds increased. The towering trees some 20 feet from our house began to sway, as though dancing with a strong, agile partner. Because some of them measure 80 feet tall, any inclination toward our house would mean the night could get really long.

Limbs crashed and split, sending John up and down the basement stairs all night, checking for damage and fine-tuning the Morse Code Neighborhood Flashlight System (you know the one). At times it felt surreal, hearing my husband communicate with our neighbor, shouting information back and forth, verifying each other's safety and the stability of our respective housetops.

Since sleep wasn't even remotely possible, we started a game of Cranium and listened to Isabel's rage. She was formidable and nondiscriminating. We were perilously insignificant.

On Friday morning the winds began to subside. I was eager to step into the outdoors, to walk onto the deck (just hoping to have a deck) and to see the results of Isabel's fury. I couldn't have been more surprised.

PEACE AFTER THE FURY We lost two trees, a beautiful old oak which turned out to be rotten inside (there's a sermon in that) and a smaller, younger maple which fell because it stood too close to the rotten oak (there's the sermon sequel).

Here's the good part: On the morning following one of the area's most damaging hurricanes on record, I stepped into our backyard to find that the towering oaks, hickories, maples and sycamores were still standing there.

They were wet and almost bare but calm and stoic—as though nothing unusual had happened. The fallen branches, mounds of leaves and air that seemed tactile were nothing new to these old characters. They had seen it all before.

They had survived years of droughts, floods and pests, along with a host of other natural threats; and they would survive this as well. Sure, there were casualties, but there were survivors, too.

As you would expect, we oohed and sighed and phoned home and compared structural viability with the neighbors, but my heart was calling me to learn a lesson, to mull it over, to, as the apostle Paul said, “think on these things” (Phil. 4:8, KJV).

You know what I was thinking. We all weather storms. They arrive unwelcome and uninvited.

We face varying strengths of turbulence and circumstances beyond our control. We bend and bow and shed our excess layers, but we do not lose heart.

We are not unlike Paul, who wrote, “We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair;

persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed" (2 Cor. 4:8-9, NIV). Paul's storms make Isabel seem like a walk in the park.

STORMS STRENGTHEN US I once heard an old, wizened farmer say that when a tree is forced to bend in strong winds, its roots are strengthened. It is literally the act of repeatedly bowing to overwhelming pressure that makes the base tough and strong and durable.

These old trees had become formidable through their experiences. They no longer appear lush and comely, but they remained standing when the storm had passed.

Our life storms cause us to harness our strengths and reassess our priorities. We shelter the things that matter most and we call forth all we know about God's sovereignty and His steadfast interaction with us.

When he faced Goliath, David reminded himself of prior encounters with a lion and a bear. That vivid recollection strengthened his belief that God was able to deliver him in the time of trouble.

I once heard a preacher say, in effect, that the lion and the bear were preparatory in God's bigger scheme of things. God knew David would need that history to embolden his own faith for the incredible challenge of the giant. I agree with that.

Storms are defining. They woo us to a place of solitude and reflection. They cause us to see our excesses and shortcomings.

They remind us to recall God's faithfulness. They challenge us to a step into a new place, bereft of comfort and ease, and to understand that God's master plan is just that—a masterful plan, which needs neither fine-tuning nor understanding from us.

The best part is this—in the midst of the turmoil, without our being able to realize it at the time, we are daily going from strength to strength. We are revisiting what we believe and what matters to us. We are gaining an inner strength that we won't even be able to identify until some of the dust has cleared.

You will be glad to know that we sustained little damage of any kind during Hurricane Isabel. Our old trees regained all their lovely leaves and colors, and our backyard has no evidence of our turbulent visitor.

But our hearts beat a little faster when we see a hurricane headed inland. Our eyes linger on the beauty of our wooded backyard an extra second, and our prayers are said with an added dose of confidence, knowing that when the next storm comes to call, the Master of the wind will be right in the middle of it.

Read a companion devotional.

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