

Perfect Storm

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Many meteorologists are calling what hit us on Monday and Tuesday the Perfect Storm. It was a conspiracy of weather systems and the moon. Hurricanes are born over warm seas. The water heats the air above it and the warm, moist air rises. Over the ocean there are no obstructions to dissipate the storm, so once set in motion the low-pressure area continues to 'feed' off the warm water. This water is the fuel that powers a hurricane. Hurricanes that follow the general pattern that Sandy was following usually turn north and then east in the Atlantic where they encounter cooler water. With the loss of fuel, they weaken and disintegrate. However because of an unusual wind pattern in the Jet Stream, Sandy found a new source of energy and continued on full strength.

The Jet Stream is the fast moving and continuous west to east flow of air at high altitude. It determines the path of storms across the country. So we know that a storm coming on shore in Vancouver will likely be visiting the east coast in a few days. Usually the west to east Jet Stream pushes hurricanes away from the east coast. But this time an unusual dip in the river of air developed over the eastern U.S. just as Sandy was heading up the coast which pushed Sandy onto land instead of directing it to the ocean. This is a highly unusual occurrence.

As Sandy moved north, the ocean water grew colder and so its fuel source was gone. Yet in another coincidence, Sandy drew upon the temperature differential between colder air coming down from Canada and warmer air from over the subtropical ocean. With this new source of energy, the winds increased slightly, and the storm stretched out into the behemoth it became.

The other bit of bad luck with this storm was that it hit at high tide and during a time when the tide is higher than average, thanks to the full moon. The powerful winds combining with the high tide created tsunami-like waves of water that over-flowed ocean front barriers and flooded vast areas of metropolitan real estate.

A "perfect storm" is an expression that describes an event where a rare combination of circumstances will dramatically aggravate a situation. We see that in a literal understanding of this storm. It was, by the standards of meteorology, perfect. But what came together this week was more than the convergence of a hurricane and lower pressure system and a full moon.

I started this sermon on Thursday morning. I was in my sister's guest room and I could hear her through the door playing with my son who was in the bath. Patricia Compton was downstairs on the phone with a reporter. Patricia is the president of the Mt. Kisco congregation and a good friend and neighbor of mine who came with us when we evacuated our home on Tuesday. Our neighborhood has no power, heat or water, making our homes unlivable, but Patricia was on the phone trying to get support from a local journalist to get the word out to help two members in this congregation. (Ours. Not hers.) A member of our youth group was taken to the hospital on Monday night during the storm. Her mother called 911 but the ambulance couldn't get through. After they were able to pick up the sick child, they delivered her to a hospital without power. Nurses were using flashlights in the hallways to find their way around. On Thursday, they were trying to get home but the house, also in my town, is unlivable. I had put a call out for a generator. One person wrote back and said there isn't an available generator in 100 miles from here, but he was wrong. Two members of our congregation and one from Mt. Kisco offered theirs. After getting all the details, we determined that we were going to take the members from Mt. Kisco up on their offer, but generators aren't easy to transport. John Cavallero (our DRE) teamed up with Ross and Ken and the 3 of them picked up and delivered the generator. Thanks to the phone call Patricia was making, 3 electricians volunteered to hook it up, but then a neighbor offered to do it and that problem was solved. *This perfect storm created a rare convergence of circumstances, an unlikely series of events that produced a conspiracy of kindness.*

I spent Wednesday trying to call members to see if they were alright, but I realized quickly that people in need of help were not going to get my phone calls. By Thursday I was feeling a little frantic about so many of you, not knowing if you were alone or in an apartment too high up for you to be able to get down or stuck in

a home without heat or water or food.

Not being able to help you or contact you directly, I decided to get in touch with our local mayors to let them know the church has power and would be happy to welcome people here. If I couldn't find you individually, I could at least get the word out on a larger scale that we are open. And while I was doing that, I learned that many of you had already reached out to each other. Folks who had power started looking for those who didn't. When I put out one of my calls to figure out who needs help, I learned that most of the people with power already had house guests or were willing to have them or were cooking for a shelter or running someone's errands. Even those of you who yourselves were victims of the storm tended toward generosity.

When some of you learned that my own home is without power or heat or water, I heard you say "I don't have power or heat, but I have water, so you can stay with me." In other words, "My life is also difficult and I'm living in uncertainty and distress, but I will share with you the little I still have." I got calls from members offering to anyone in need rooms or money or food and even one fully furnished apartment.

Our District Executive, Andrea Lerner, heard that our members are in trouble and the entire Central East Regional Group is mobilizing to help us and our congregations in Freeport and Staten Island. Today, congregations across the region are all taking up collections to help us. Andrea offered to send us \$500 in advance in case we need to purchase food or get someone to a hotel. I told her that, as it happens, our building is doing fine and our members are helping each other and I've got a Discretionary Fund that can be used for this kind of crisis. So Andrea told us to use it for the community shelter we've opened; anyone who comes in looking for help should be able to get it.

We are not alone. *This perfect storm created a rare convergence of circumstances, an unlikely series of events that produced a conspiracy of generosity.*

This storm became something of the traditional political October Surprise. It happens often during an election year that shortly before the vote, something happens with the potential to alter the outcome. Usually the October Surprise is fabricated, but this year Sandy may herself have become the game changer. We have a convergence of weather systems and political systems that might create a new way of understanding. We saw it happen quickly when partisan rivals New Jersey Governor Christie and President Obama put aside politicking to serve a more immediate, more universal need. They responded to the crisis along the New Jersey shore as partners in leadership and as human beings confronting sadness and loss and even their own powerlessness. Last week I suggested that we need a new model of leadership, one that brings humility and curiosity to the conversation. I suggested that, rather than a two-sided debate, we needed to encourage conversation that created new ideas to difficult problems, that approached our complicated challenges with less of a winner-takes-all strategy and more of an authentic dialog grounded in cooperation and a sincere desire to move the conversation forward.

I admit, when I wrote that sermon, I was in love with the concept but saw it as something of a pipe dream. I could see the need perfectly but couldn't imagine a scenario that could bring such reasonableness into a process that had become so unconstrained. And yet, I stand before you just one week later feeling like I've seen a glimpse of a new world.

I don't believe we're actually in a new world, mind you—just that we're getting a preview. There's a story in Hebrew Scripture. Moses has been called by god to lead his people out of slavery. He's standing in front of the burning bush, he's taken his shoes off recognizing he's in the presence of the Sacred, and he's learning about the liberation of people who have been enslaved, a people, his people, who are suffering. And, to make the moment even better, he learns that he's about to be the hero of this story. This is a good day for Moses. But after learning about the land of milk and honey, he is told that he will have to convince the Pharaoh to let the people go, which, at best, seems like a long shot and once he's done that, he'll lead these tribes of people through the desert for 40 years, more or less.

Right now, I'm feeling like we've had a Moses moment. We've been given a vision of the Promised Land, so we know it exists. Now we have to convince the Pharaoh and spend 40 years wandering in the desert. But just one storm provided this sighting. *This perfect storm created a rare convergence of circumstances, an unlikely series of events that brought together a hurricane and an election in such a way as to produce a conspiracy of partnership.*

Last week I also noted that global warming is the single greatest threat we are facing today but because people don't understand it or are in denial about it or dislike the solutions, the conversation had all but left the

public arena this election cycle. And then we were hit (I think I can say we were literally hit) with the consequences of climate change. We've been told we'll see an extension of hurricane season, and an expansion of the geographic location of hurricanes and tropical storms. We've been told there won't be greater frequency as much as greater intensity. We've been told that the melting of the polar ice caps has increased the oceans and decreased the shores. But, having been told doesn't mean we've been listening.

As the storm was brewing, my sister posted her frustration to Facebook with people in evacuation zones who weren't leaving their homes. I didn't really understand why she felt so strongly about it until I realized that my cousin, my father's only brother's only son, was going to be sent into the storm to save those people. As a police officer in a coastal town, Brandon would be going door to door asking folks to find safer ground. Some people didn't heed the early warnings. Whole neighborhoods were being evacuated, but people didn't leave. Governments learned from Katrina and opened pet-friendly shelters, but people didn't leave. Men and women were deployed through the area, men like my cousin Brandon, telling people they needed to get out, but they didn't leave. And then the waters came as predicted. The tide rose and the ocean broke the barriers and moved into homes and people found themselves stuck in their attics waiting for rescue.

Climate change is a threat to our safety. This storm was a warning, a wake-up call, but not everyone is listening, not everyone is waking up. I'm afraid that no matter the sirens we sound, there will always be people in their attics waiting to be rescued.

Nonetheless, I think this superstorm might be the opportunity we needed. It might have been severe enough and left us uncomfortable enough that we will begin to have the conversation we've been avoiding. *This perfect storm might be a conspiracy of mindfulness about our shared future.*

I'm hoping my sermon is a little short today, leaving us plenty of time to hear your stories. This storm has affected us all, whether we found ourselves struggling without power or heat or water or because we opened our homes to people in need or because our lives were stopped due to a gas shortage or unavailable transportation or closed banks or lack of cell phone or internet services. I'm hoping the storm has affected our impulses for generosity and kindness and our sense of being connected and dependent in new ways. And I'm hoping that, ultimately, we are allowing this storm to change us, to teach us the horror and the beauty of the perfect storm.