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### **The Eye of the Storm (Luke 21: 5-19)**

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Three months ago, you might remember, a catastrophic storm hit the Bahamas. The winds associated with Hurricane Dorian equalled the highest velocity ever recorded for a hurricane at landfall and it was the worst natural disaster ever to have hit that place. Just after the event, I read a story about seasoned ‘storm chaser’, Josh Morgerman, who was sheltering in a school in one of the worst affected areas. Apparently, after hours of pounding by violent winds, there was a ferocious ‘white-out’ and a deafening, terrifying roaring. Most of the building was destroyed, all communications had long since been cut, and ‘there was more storm to come’. Without shelter, the hurricane would be deadly. But, on the account he subsequently gave, Morgerman said that he and others inside the building had one piece of luck – they found themselves, ‘at that moment, in the eye of the hurricane – a tranquil but fleeting respite from a ferocious vortex. They took their chance to flee, driving to a government building that was filled with new refugees’, and their lives were saved.<sup>1</sup>

Well, this story came to my mind as I was reflecting on the reading we’ve just heard – for reasons which I hope might become apparent! In the narrative of Luke’s gospel, as we saw last week, Jesus is nearing the end of his earthly ministry – his story is building towards the crisis of his arrest and condemnation. And in one of his last public teachings, he speaks of two storms bearing down on his followers. One will see the destruction of the massive and seemingly impregnable Temple in Jerusalem – ‘the days will come’, Jesus says, ‘when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down’. The other storm, which will befall them first, is a

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<sup>1</sup> Reis Thebault, ‘A storm chaser went silent as Dorian hit ...’ <https://www.smh.com.au/world/north-america/a-storm-chaser-went-silent-as-dorian-hit-he-reemerged-with-a-harrowing-story-20190905-p52o3i.html>

vortex of persecution: ‘they will arrest you and persecute you; they will hand you over to synagogues and prisons’, bring you ‘before kings and governors’, and you will be betrayed to death even by parents, brothers, relatives and friends.

Well, by the time of the writing of Luke’s gospel towards the end of the first century, both these storms had ‘landed’. The Roman army destroyed the city of Jerusalem and its Temple in the year 70CE, while the first Christians had been persecuted by both Jewish and Roman authorities from the time of Jesus’ death on. But the significance of this text, I take it, lies not primarily in its attribution of prophetic foresight to Jesus. The real interest is in how Jesus is remembered as having taught his disciples to approach the tribulations they were to face. His instructions seem like just the kind of thing he might have said – counter-intuitive, counter-cultural, the expression of a distinctively new vision of reality. I find them profoundly helpful as I seek to face the storms and tribulations of our time, and so I’d like to unpack them with you tonight.

To begin, Jesus enjoins detachment, critical distance. The temple, he says, will be destroyed and, in some unspecified time frame, a whole series of disasters will follow: ‘wars and insurrections’, nation rising against nation, earthquakes, famines and plagues. Naturally enough his hearers want to know details. ‘Teacher, when will this be, and what will be the sign that this is about to take place?’ But Jesus doesn’t seem to want them to get too fascinated by the prospect of apocalypse, and – strikingly – he warns his disciples not to make any of these disasters mean too much. ‘Beware that you are not led astray, for many will come in my name and say, “I am he!” and, ‘The time is near!” Do not go after them’.

In terms of the theology of the New Testament, James Alison has brilliantly argued that the import of Jesus’ teaching here is to uncouple our vision of God from violence and mayhem.<sup>2</sup> He’s subverting our human tendency to attribute divine meaning to disaster and so become morbidly obsessed by it. For, in Alison’s words,

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<sup>2</sup> See James Alison, *Raising Abel: The Recovery of the Eschatological Imagination* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1996).

the disciples must 'learn to distance themselves from attributing theological importance to the violent events of this world. They have no such importance'.<sup>3</sup>

It follows, then, that what Jesus is really concerned with is teaching his disciples how to dwell in a new way amidst the violent cataclysms of history. He's seeking to communicate his profound confidence that underneath all the destruction, confusion and hurt, there is a massively more powerful reality available, quietly holding and empowering them. This is why they're not to worry about preparing their defense in advance, 'for I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand'. And nor are they to be perturbed by the betrayal of family and friends, their rejection by community, because ultimately 'not a hair of your head will perish'. The storms may and will rage but, Jesus teaches, you are to remain quiet in the midst – secure in a deep equanimity and faithfulness. And ultimately, 'by your endurance, you will gain your souls'.

This is a vision I find deeply appealing. If I think of my response to the storms that seem to loom for us, Jesus' teaching feels like a powerful antidote to becoming obsessed with the daily news cycle, feeling by turns outraged and impotent, energy expended in futile anxiety and dread. And yet, I also wonder about it as an imaginative resource. Part of me feels it's hugely important not to be tossed by all the sound and fury, the threats of apocalypse and collapse. And then I wonder, have I just checked out? Is equanimity in the face of all this a form of escapism? Am I trying to operate out of some illusory parallel universe, just hoping it will all pass by?

Well, these are questions perhaps we need to ponder for ourselves – discovering the texture of our own responsiveness. But let me offer a couple of thoughts. As I've sat with the metaphor with which I began, it seems that a critical issue is how we understand the relationship between the eye and the storm. Or, in terms of the gospel text, how we connect Jesus' exhortation to dwell in a spirit of equanimity, peace and trust with the fact of suffering and destruction.

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<sup>3</sup> Alison, *Raising Abel*, p.145.

In the story I told at the beginning, all that was possible for those caught in Hurricane Dorian was to wait it out as best they could. Some storms just pass; you seek as much as possible to locate yourself in the still centre so as to emerge on the other side, able to play a part perhaps in rebuilding what's been lost or damaged. But, in human terms, not all storms are like that – they don't just pass by themselves. And it doesn't seem to me that Jesus is interested, most of the time, in his disciples just hunkering down, waiting things out. After all, he's the one provoking some of the disruption, sending them into the world, to heal, to love, to proclaim a new vision of God. They're called to face and engage the forces that diminish and destroy life without just playing it safe, ensuring their immediate security.

So I wonder if the critical issue is that their (and our) capacity to do this, to face that which threatens life and keep facing it without giving up or collapsing in despair, is profoundly affected by where we source our energy. What Jesus seems to be asking his disciples is that they learn to live from and so bear God's peace in the midst of the world's chaos and pain – not so they can bypass or ignore the storms of life, but so that they may bring a different energy, the peace that passes all understanding.

And this is where for us, I think, our practice of contemplation matters. In meditation, we return again and again to the still centre of our lives and of all life, not so as to escape reality but so as to be in the midst in a different spirit, making the shelter of God's unshakeable peace available for others. So, returning to the self-suspicion I mentioned earlier, it seems to me that we really can tell the difference in ourselves between the numbed peace of oblivion, forgetfulness, avoidance – and the expectant, awakened, present peace of prayerful trust. This is the energy that transforms, the endurance that saves.