

The Great Storm of '33

Mark 16:1-8

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Being new to a community, you can really feel like you missed out on something when everyone talks about the big storms of the past. We have heard tales of the blizzard of 1978. The description of Misquamicut Beach in the wake of Super Storm Sandy and pyramids of sand on Atlantic Avenue leave us shaking our head in disbelief. Town Hall has photos of the flood that hit Westerly in 2010. Those rising waters are not something folks will soon forget. If you lived through those storms they left you with a shared experience of something you endured with others, a common bond so to speak.

Whether you were part of the big storms that left their mark on this community in the past or like me you missed those epic moments, this morning I want to share with you a storm that touched all of our lives. It is a storm that not only touched our lives it is a storm that continues to have a major impact on us even today. The storm I am talking about is literally a storm of biblical proportions. The storm I am talking about is the great storm of '33. When I say the great storm of '33 I am not talking about 1933 or 1833 or even as far back as 1733. No sir, I just mean '33. It was the year of our Lord, 33 AD. It was the year Jesus died.¹

As with any storm worth remembering there were warning signs. But as with any storm worth its salt no one quite knew how to interpret those signs as they were taking place. Jesus was drawing near to Jerusalem. He had warned his disciples numerous times storm clouds were gathering and they were going to burst forth when he got to Jerusalem. But on Palm Sunday with the skies so blue and the future so bright, storm clouds were the furthest thing from anyone's mind as they shouted Hosanna and prepared for Jesus to be king. And yet...there were signs.

Right after that wonderful parade, with the sun shining in all its glory, the gospel of John tells us Jesus spoke of his coming death. The voice of God addressed Jesus from the highest heavens, but the crowd only heard a loud roar. As befits a coming storm, when people heard the sound, some said it thundered. When Jesus celebrated the Passover Feast with his disciples the night before his arrest, as he evoked images of the lamb that was slain, you can almost imagine a mighty wind gust blowing through that upper room as the disciples remembered the winds that separated the waters of the Red Sea so God's people could pass safely through on dry land. On that Friday we now call Good there was an earthquake. That same Friday as Jesus hung on the cross the lights went out. Right at high noon the sky turned black and that darkness hung like a cloak a full three hours. Knowing the passion of Jesus, that was truly an eclipse of the heart.

¹ Most think Jesus actually died closer to 30 AD, but using the generally accepted age of Jesus being 33 at his death, I am referring to the year as 33 AD.

When the curtain in the temple was torn in two there was no mistaking the storm that was coming would alter the landscape of the world. In fact, the coming storm would cause a massive shift in the universe, changing forever the relationship between God and human beings. As Joseph of Arimathea took the dead body of Jesus from the cross and laid him in a tomb, the last sound before the storm hit was the thud of the rock that sealed the tomb.

That was Friday. Sometime between Friday night and early Sunday morning the storm hit. Sometime between Friday night and early Sunday morning the snow began to fall. As the snow dropped from the skies it began to cover the ground. Soon there were mounds. As the flakes fell steadily for hour upon hour it built into huge banks, accumulating, growing and expanding until everything was covered in a blanket of snow. This was an epic storm. This was a storm for the ages. Indeed, this was a storm of biblical proportions. But unlike the storms that leave in their wake death and destruction, this storm brought healing. This storm brought comfort. This storm brought grace and mercy. This storm brought forgiveness. This storm brought life. This storm brought hope. And perhaps most important of all, the Great Storm of '33 brought love, the kind of love that comes from knowing God loves the whole world so much he sent his one and only Son Jesus Christ to die for us so that we could live with him and for him.

Now you may have never heard of the Great Storm of '33. You may never have heard of this massive and miraculous snow storm that covered the whole earth in a blanket of love. I have an explanation for that. I have an explanation for why you might not have ever heard of the Great Storm of '33. You see, something else happened that day. Jesus Christ rose from the dead. Understandably that got top billing. That is why the angels made a special appearance. You can forgive the angels for not focusing on the Great Storm of '33. I mean, Jesus rising from the dead is the main attraction. And you can forgive the women at the tomb and the disciples who came later for not focusing on the snow storm. They noticed one thing that day, and what they noticed is that Jesus had risen from the dead.

But just because they did not mention it, don't believe for a minute there was no snow storm back on that day. I am here to tell you there was a great storm in '33, a blanket of snow that was rich and soft and pure and holy. It was a snow storm like the prophet Isaiah predicted when he said, "Though your sins are like scarlet I will make them as white as snow." The snow that fell that day had to be the snow that falls from a great storm. The snow that fell that day had to be snow enough to cover not just Jerusalem, but all of Israel, the whole Middle East, down into Africa, and up to the nations north of Israel, and the snow had to go all the way to the east and all the way to the west...it had to, for the Lord promised that as far as the east is from the west so far would he remove our transgressions from us...that snow storm went north and south and east and west and it didn't leave any corner of this earth untouched. It was a deep

snow covering the gutters of our lives and the dungeons of despair. And it was a towering snow that reached to the heavens for it repaired the relationship that had been broken so many years before when men and women asserted their own will and established themselves as god. The Great Storm of '33 brought human beings down to earth, and finding that God had visited this very earth through the footsteps of Jesus, a genuine and lasting reconciliation occurred as God proved his love for us once and for all through the death of Jesus.

It is the common experience of being there for that snow storm, for the Great Storm of '33 that brings us together today. We have something in common. We all share in that storm, for that storm continues to drop snow even now.

A story Philip Yancey writes about in his book titled *Amazing Grace* reminds me of the Great Storm of '33. Philip Yancey writes of a girl who was growing up in Traverse City, Michigan. She had old-fashioned parents who overreacted to her nose ring, her music, and the length of her skirts. When she would get grounded she would scream, "I hate you." Finally, living out a plan she had formed in her mind, she runs away to Detroit. She soon meets a man who drives a big fancy car who offers her a ride, buys her lunch, and arranges a place for her to stay. He gives her some pills that make her feel better than she ever has before. Just like she thought, she had been right all along. Her parents were keeping her from the fun.

She lives it up for two months, then a year. The man with the big car teaches her a few things that men like, and they are willing to pay quite a bit of money for it. She orders room service in her fancy penthouse, and if she does think of home, it is only as a boring place that she thankfully escaped from.

After a year signs of illness appear and the boss turns mean. He kicks her out and she is alone on the street. What little money she makes by turning tricks goes toward her drug habit, and she sleeps on metal grates outside the big department stores.

One night it hits her. She no longer feels like a woman who has got the world wired. She feels cold and alone, and afraid. Right then she remembers her small town and cherry trees blooming...she smiles at the thought of her golden retriever dashing through the rows and rows of blossoms chasing a tennis ball. God, why did I leave? My dog back home eats better than I do now. She's sobbing, and she knows in a flash that more than anything else in the world she wants to go home.

She calls and only gets the answering machine. The third time she says, "Dad, Mom, it's me. I was wondering about maybe coming home. I'm catching a bus up your way, and it'll get there around midnight tomorrow. If you're not there, well, I guess I'll just stay on the bus until it hits Canada."

During the long bus ride, she realizes how many holes are in her plan. What if her parents are out of town? Worse, what if they are home and don't come to meet her. She tries to figure out what to say if they are there. As she practices saying, "I'm sorry" she realizes she hasn't apologized to anyone in years. And then the bus enters her town. She recognizes it all, but a deep fear of not finding home fills her heart. The bus stops and she gets off. She walks into the terminal not knowing what to expect. Not one of the thousand scenes that have played out in her mind prepares her for what she sees. There, in the concrete-walls-and-plastic-chairs bus terminal in Traverse City, Michigan, stands a group of forty brothers and sisters and great-aunts and uncles and cousins and a grandmother and a great-grandmother to boot. They're all wearing goofy party hats and blowing noise-makers, and taped across the entire wall of the terminal is a computer-generated banner that reads, "Welcome home!"²

When Philip Yancey tells us this beautiful tale of restoration, full of vivid images, he leaves out one part of the story. He forgot to tell us what the weather was like that day this lonely young girl returned to Traverse City and found her family waiting with open arms. Philip Yancey forgot to tell us it was snowing...on that day of reconciliation and forgiveness, it was the Great Storm of '33 all over again, leaving behind a blanket of snow, filling that sweet and tender day with a covering of grace and mercy, a covering of peace and hope, a covering of kindness and compassion, and a covering of love that wrapped that precious child of God in his arms of love.

Having grown up in a small agricultural community in central California, we did not see much snow. But in doing a bit of research I have discovered it snowed there more often than I realized. I was too young to remember it, but apparently our little town had a massive snow storm sometime in 1962. Back at that time there were two Presbyterian churches in our town. There was the First Presbyterian Church of Hanford which met on Irwin Street. And there was another Presbyterian Church, the Japanese American Presbyterian Church. Sometime in 1962 the two churches merged and became one. My life was blessed by that merging of the First Presbyterian Church, with a membership that was almost 100% white with the Japanese American Presbyterian Church, which I am almost certain was 100% Japanese American.

Because of that merger I got to know a woman named Lorna Uno who not only taught our junior high youth fellowship, but was also there many years later for the laying on of hands and prayer when I was ordained as a Presbyterian pastor. Naomi greeted me every Sunday with a smile. When I moved away to college I received a package in the mail. It was a bag of pistachios. It was sent by Naomi Tagawa. She wanted me to know the church had not forgotten me as she sent love and prayers. Ernie and Michi had us out to their house numerous times. My favorite was a Christmas Eve when our whole family, my parents and all five Eberly kids, were crammed into our old Ford Fairlane 500 white station wagon. My dad had found a Christmas station and we

² Yancey, *Amazing Grace*, 49-51.

were singing the carols with glad and joyful hearts. And there was Maki Hase, my dad's good friend. Maki grew fruit trees Picking fruit is hard work in the 100 degree days of summer in the central San Joaquin Valley, but having the chance to work alongside Maki was a treat. Maki didn't make it to church much, but he gave generously and he could tell a great joke.

Back in 1962 the First Presbyterian Church of Hanford and the Japanese American Presbyterian Church merged and became one. In 1962 World War II was a very recent memory. During the war many whites in California discriminated against the Japanese Americans. There was prejudice. And there were internment camps where the Japanese Americans were herded up and sent during the war. Seventeen years after the war, with Japanese Americans who had been prisoners in those very internment camps, a Japanese American Church merged with a white Presbyterian Church. When Jesus died we are told he tore down the dividing walls of hostility. The reconciliation that took place during that merger makes me proud and thankful for all those who were there in 1962 when dividing walls of hostility came tumbling down. I can't find one single reference in the local papers to the weather on that day when the First Presbyterian Church of Hanford merged with the Japanese American Presbyterian Church, but I know in my heart of hearts exactly what the weather was like. It was snowing. It was as if the Great Storm of '33 happened all over again.

My dad died during Labor Day weekend in 2004. As he got sick he was first confined to a wheelchair and then to a bed. While he was in a wheelchair my brother-in-law built him a wheelchair ramp so he could get up the stairs and into our house. When my dad died we had his memorial service on Saturday. Monday was the Labor Day holiday. Something special happened that Labor Day. It is something I will forever treasure. The services for my dad had been Saturday and now all the relatives were getting ready to leave town on that Labor Day Monday. My mom, even though she was filled with grief, was thinking of others. She saw the wheelchair ramp that our house no longer needed, and she had my brother Danny call out to Maki Hase's house. I told you earlier Maki was a wonderful friend for my dad and for our whole family. Now Maki was getting old and he was in a wheelchair. My mom called his house to ask if Maki could use the wheelchair ramp. Pretty soon we were loading the ramp into a pickup and heading out to Maki's house. My dad's brothers had traveled to California from Ohio. They planned on heading back to the airport that Monday. But when they heard about our big project to take the wheelchair ramp to Maki's house they changed their plans so they could come along and help.

Sawdust was flying at Maki's house and hammers were striking nails and there was just a lot of excitement. Maki was there smiling the whole time. I watched. I am not gifted in any way, shape or form with tools, and so my brothers put me on the sideline while they all went to work with my uncles, my dad's brothers. In no time at all the work was done. When they finished the ground was covered in sawdust. It is ironic that

I never learned to use tools, because I used to hang out with my dad in his shop and watch him work. And even though I am worthless with any kind of building, carpentry, or home repair, I did have one job I could be trusted with. After sawing up a storm, the ground at my dad's feet would be covered with sawdust. The smell of it even now catches me up short. My dad would finish his work and ask me if I would sweep the floor. As I would do the one job I was qualified to do, my dad would sit there proudly and watch as I loaded dustpan after dustpan in the garbage can. Later he would say to my mom, "Wayne sure did a fine job sweeping up the garage." Because of that the smell of sawdust never ceases to make me stop and say thank you to God for the wonderful dad he gave to me.

So there we were at Maki's house. The work was done. There was a pile of sawdust on the ground. I asked Maki's wife if I could have a Ziploc bag. She had a puzzled look on her face but she got me a bag. I took the bag, grabbed a broom and a dustpan, and began to sweep up the sawdust. Maki's wife tried to stop me. She said leave it alone, she would clean it up later. As I kept on working I looked at her and said, "I am not cleaning. I am collecting." That day I filled up a bag with sawdust and I keep it with me in a very safe and special place. I had to leave the bag open at first so it could dry out. The sawdust was moist when I gathered it. It had a covering of snow all in and through it.

In 1962 a merger took place between two churches and because of that my life was blessed with a whole family of friends from that Japanese American Church. Forty years after the merger, on one of the most memorable days of my life, a day when God brought hope in the midst of the despair of death, it all happened at the home of one of the members from the Japanese American Church. It all happened at the home of Maki Hase.

We are here today because we have experienced the transformation of life that is a direct result of the Great Storm of '33. A lost and lonely young girl comes home to find a welcome beyond her wildest imagination. Two groups of people who for all accounts could be bitter enemies choose to lay aside past hurts and they merge together, a merger that is a powerful demonstration of how in the Great Storm of '33 God was reconciling this world. And a person like me can come to bury his father and then in a small bag of sawdust find a sign that I was not alone. God was with me in my time of sadness and loss, reminding me that Jesus is the resurrection and the life. No matter where your life is today, no matter how far you have run or how low you have sunk, you need not worry. You are not alone. There was a Great Storm in '33. It covered the earth in a blanket of snow. Today the forecast calls for snow. 100 percent the forecast calls for snow. That snow wants to come into your life and cover you with God's grace and mercy. That snow wants to fill you with God's peace and hope. That snow wants to wrap you up in the arms of Jesus, to wrap you up in the love of God that will never ever let you go.