

The Vintage Voice

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Christmas, Hurricanes, and the Importance of Family

The Rev. Bob Libby

Miami has a new classical music radio station and yesterday it was playing a symphonic medley that contained variations on a familiar tune. What was it? It kept bouncing back between the strings and the flutes. Aha! It was *O Come, O Come, Emmanuel*. Then, on the hour, the station's newscaster gave the latest update on a tropical depression that mercifully had changed its course, lowered its velocity, and was heading out to sea. In the strange way that my mind works, I started processing Christmas, hurricanes, and the importance of family.

Last August, the south Florida media had a heyday recalling the tenth anniversary of Hurricane Andrew in 1992. I've lived through five hurricanes in my life, and Andrew was the worst. There were two on Long Island when I was a child. One hit Camp Lejeune, North Carolina the night I was the officer of the day in 1954. Hurricane Dora sat in the St. John's River near Jacksonville, Florida in 1964, and for twenty-four hours tore boats from their moorings and trees from their roots.

But Hurricane Andrew made a direct hit on the southern half of Miami-Dade County. It was a Category 5 hurricane, which meant that it contained sustained winds of over 150 mph. I remember hearing one radio report that the wind meter on the roof of the Hurricane Control Center in Coral Gables registered 187 mph when it blew away. Homestead, Florida sustained the most damage and looked like Hiroshima after the bomb. Key Biscayne fared slightly better, although we were without electricity for several days and there was water everywhere. Windows were broken; roofs were blown away and the streets were blocked with fallen trees. Before we could open our parish day school, we had to shovel four inches of mud out of the classrooms.

The experience of that trauma taught me an invaluable lesson about the importance of family and the abundance of God's grace.

In 1991, the year before Hurricane Andrew, everyone was talking about "the next big one." It had been 25 years since Betsy covered our island with two feet of water and snakes took refuge in Banyan trees. Prophetically, everyone seemed to agree that Betsy's successor was long overdue.

At dinner parties and parish suppers, the conversation inevitably came around to "when it comes time to evacuate, where will you go and what will you take with you?" The causeway to the mainland crosses the Atlantic at one point and Biscayne Bay at another. Winds as low as 40 mph have been known to push a car from one lane to another without prior notice. So the conventional wisdom was to leave early to avoid getting blown off the road.

A few stalwart condo dwellers declared that, "come hell or high water," they were staying in their apartments. "I'd rather die in my own bed," said one veteran of Betsy, "than be trapped in a car on I-95 or the Florida Turnpike."

Most agreed that at the first sign of a hurricane heading our way, reservations should be made at a hotel near the airport.

Next came a discussion of what to take with you. Plenty of cash, bottled water, non-perishable food, batteries, flashlights, a radio, raincoats, blankets, credit cards and passports seemed to be on everybody's list. But opinions diverged when it came to prized possessions. Jewelry could go in a plastic bag, but what about the porcelain vase that belonged to Grandmother? Just how much "stuff" could you take with you?

At one such gathering, conversation was brought to a screeching halt by the statement, "Take the photo albums and the family pictures; everything else can be replaced."

"Of course!" was everybody's instantaneous response. The suggestion had at least two meanings. That picture of the children 20 years ago at Disney World could never be re-posed. The photo of Grandmother and Grandfather on their golden anniversary was an heirloom of infinite value. When all is said and done the things that can't be replaced are memories and relationships: family and friends and happy times together.

All of the above came back to me when, last summer, my wife and I flew into Macarthur Airport on Eastern Long Island to spend a long weekend at the old family beach cottage on Long Island Sound. The cottage had been built in 1920. It was the first house on Cedar Beach, and it was built out of spare parts from my grandfather's construction business. My sister now owns it, and she and her husband have rebuilt it into a year-round residence.

One of the prized family heirlooms that remain from my childhood is the old family photo album. We spent a warm, fuzzy evening around a coffee table, thumbing through 70 years of family history. There was great-grandmother Gabler, a stolid woman who lived well into her 90s. She raised four children and one orphaned grandson by taking in washing in Long Hill, Connecticut. Born on the Lower East Side of New York, she could recall with graphic clarity Lincoln's funeral procession coming through Manhattan on its way to Illinois.

There they were, six generations. The fun part came when we started comparing our own grandchildren with the pictures of their grandparents, great-grandparents, and the great-greats. Look who got Grandpa's nose and look at Jessica's smile, it's identical to her great-grandmother's. And there were other comparisons that don't always show up in pictures: sweetness, creativity, stubbornness, boldness, sense of humor, determination, faith, honesty, and compassion. Somehow, they also made their way down the family tree, whether by nature or nurture I know not. There were also the sad pictures: the 18 year old who was killed in a car crash, the bubble baby who died at age two, the mentally retarded cousin. But in spite of its imperfections, what a wonderful mystery is this thing called family. None of us got where we are by ourselves, and no one had a totally easy time of it.

From time to time, I need to go back to my roots and give thanks for the family from which I have come. It was and is by no means perfect, but it has been a very special avenue of God's grace for me.

And so it's time to get ready for the celebration of our Lord's birth. The hurricane season will be officially over and, of course, there will be family gatherings and, oh yes, we will take lots of pictures. They can't be replaced.



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