

## Never Forsaken

Thunder cracked like a hundred bombs exploding at once as I jolted awake. Rain cascaded on me in a steady downpour as I struggled to free myself from my waterlogged sleeping bag. I sloshed into my tennis shoes and stood up in the pitch darkness illuminated for half-seconds at a time by lightning bolts. This was a bad storm, even by north Texas standards. It was time to get out of the open and find shelter.

I think I was about 13 years old, and I was on my Order of the Arrow induction campout. We were given camping skill tests; our discipline was tested by maintaining silence; and we did some community service work for the campground hosting us. As I think back on the weekend, the only thing I really remember was the storm.

“It’s supposed to storm tonight, but we aren’t sure yet,” one of the leaders announced to our group (weather forecasting was as much art as science in 1969). “If it gets bad come back here to this pavilion.” Now, those words were reverberating in my slightly terrified mind as I struggled to get my bearings. A lightning flash—there...the road back! I started running in complete darkness, guided by gravel crunching beneath my feet. Unseen, I missed the fork in the road that would have taken me to a bridge that crossed a now-raging creek.

Of my time in the water, what I recall most clearly was the sheer power—the force with which it knocked me off my feet and swept me away. Immediately, I knew what had happened—how stupid of me to forget the turn in the road! I had experience swimming in strong currents in the creek near our home, so I turned perpendicular to the flow and started using a side stroke—a powerful kick stroke that keeps your head above water. I didn’t have to worry about my shoes slowing me down. They disappeared the moment gravel turned to water.

I didn’t know where I was when I reached some bushes that helped me pull out of the angry rapids. I started walking, following the creek, but I was on the opposite side from where I imagined I was. I was walking away from camp, not toward it. The sound of rain and thunder continued to muffle everything else. Occasionally the dark was illuminated by flashes revealing dense woods rising up the bank through sheets of rain. I started calling for help....

Unknowingly getting further from camp, my cries for help were answered by nothing but rain and thunder. I’ll admit that by now I was plenty scared, exhausted and running on adrenaline, and about to give up hope. Anger and desperation welled up within me and I shouted at the top of my child-lungs, “Isn’t there anybody in this God-forsaken place?!” Pretty strong language for a 13-year-old....

“Up here!” came a shout. I looked in the darkness and just then a lightning bolt flashed. At the top of the slope 50 yards away from the creek stood a man—as drenched as I. Words can’t express the joy that went through me as I ran blindly up that slope. I don’t know that he said anything more than, “Come with me.” He led me to a small outhouse that had a porch where we waited.

I must have fallen asleep. When I woke the sun was out. The man who answered my desperate cry silently led me back up the creek to where my soggy sleeping bag lay. Then, he departed. I looked for him everywhere among the campers, but never saw him again.

These days we find ourselves in different types of storms—firestorms and smoke so dense it blocks the afternoon sun; cultural storms that have us shouting our slogans and raising our fists; storms of age and illness; storms of grief as we watch our past life disappear; all of it threatening to leave us feeling abandoned. Has God forsaken us—or this place?

Life has storms, but life is good. My experience has taught me that God is with us in the storm. I have learned that it is OK to reach that near-hopeless point of despair and anger; it is OK to shout. God has never, nor will God ever forsake us. Sometimes God sends angels to encourage us, shelter us and lead us back to where we need to be—even if it is a soggy place. The storm subsides, and the raging waters are once again tamed. It is then that we may have work to do. Perhaps we will be angels to others.... May God so bless us.

*It is the Lord who goes before you. He will be with you; he will not fail you or forsake you. Do not fear or be dismayed.*  
(Deuteronomy 31:8)

Be the church, --pastor tony