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KATRINA 2005-15: Storm lifted hearts toward God

by Marilyn Stewart/Louisiana Baptist Message, posted Monday, August 31, 2015 (3 years ago)

EDITOR'S NOTE: This story is from an Aug. 27 Baptist Message anniversary edition marking the 10-year point since Hurricane Katrina's landfall on Aug. 29, 2005.

NEW ORLEANS (BP) -- Raw emotions bubbled to the surface as people struggled with the losses brought about by Hurricane Katrina. As Southern Baptists faithfully offered care to those suffering from the storm, hearts warmed to the Gospel.

The power of relationship

When the local news warned that those remaining behind must write their Social Security numbers on their arms so bodies could be identified after the hurricane, Kelli and George Esler knew it was time to leave.

The Eslers went to Grenada, Miss., where a couple who had befriended them the previous year, John and Candy Saxon, found them a place to stay. John was a New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary student. Candy and Kelli taught school in Chalmette, a New Orleans suburb.

With news of the Chalmette's devastation, Kelli realized her perfect life was over.

"Living on the floor of some lady's house, in a city I'd never heard of, in a state I'd never visited, that was the breaking point," Kelli said. "I knew how out of control all of this was."

Kelli saw how far they had fallen when her husband, a computer programmer, took a job sweeping the floor of a sawmill. But as George worked alongside John at the mill, he came to faith in Christ.

The following Sunday, Kelli bowed her head and prayed, "I don't know what this means, but I know I have no other option but to follow You." Afterward, Kelli said, the world appeared more in focus. "The color was so much clearer to me," she said.

The couple's journey to faith had started long before Katrina through their friendship with John and Candy. Kelli said they had faithfully shown her Jesus, though she didn't realize it at the time.

"I recognized that there was something about them that was attractive, something that we wanted," Kelli said. "Something I wanted."

As the two couples spent time together, John brought up faith, salvation and the Bible. Through their relationship, the hurdles that kept her and George from the Lord were cleared away one by one, Kelli said.

Today, the couple is active at Westwego Baptist Church where Kelli is assistant to pastor Jay Adkins. Looking back, Kelli said she knows God was at work every step along the way.

"It is the power of relationship," Kelli said. "They invested in us and got down to where we were and brought us to where they were."

Turning point

Jason Bezou decided God didn't exist by the time he was 13 years old. As a mathematical, solutions-oriented person, Jason thought Christians "sounded crazy" when they talked about the Holy Spirit.

The day before Hurricane Katrina set its sights on Louisiana, Jason sat in a restaurant with Sara Blackwell, the woman who would later become his wife. When the conversation turned to their pasts, Jason said they drew a line and decided the past was over, never to be brought up again -- a line that became a lesson in forgiveness for Jason. "That's what Jesus does," Sara said.

Sara was a nurse at a Denham Springs nursing home in the Baton Rouge area and aided patients and evacuees the next day with Jason at her side. Though he had come to help others, he soon realized his own family was in danger. His grandmother had not left New Orleans, and his father remained in Waveland, Miss., ground zero for the storm's landfall along the Mississippi Gulf Coast.

When all efforts to find Jason's family members failed, Sara suggested they pray. Though he scoffed at first, Jason decided to give God a chance.

"Just for this moment, I'm going to believe," Jason said.

As he prayed, everything he and Sara had discussed about God came together. The comfort and reassurance he received from the Holy Spirit became the turning point that sealed his commitment to Christ.

"In all of the moments leading up to the storm and in the aftermath, there was one thing that was certain. Jesus was with me," Jason said. "I didn't know He was there all the time, but I'm glad He waited for the right moment to reveal Himself."

Active at First Baptist Church in New Orleans, Jason shares his testimony and the story of the rescue of his family members in his book, "Saved: One man's salvation through Hurricane Katrina," and through speaking engagements and his nonprofit media producer, www.savedproducer.org.

Part of the family

Depression had been a part of Kathi King's life for some time, but after losing her home in Hurricane Katrina, life became even more difficult.

"Things started to fall apart," Kathi said. "I went through the worst depression of my life. I didn't want to live."

Kathi said she and her husband "washed ashore in California" after the storm, returning to New Orleans eight months later. For four years, the couple lived in an RV as they rebuilt their home next to the London Avenue canal, not far from where the levee broke.

As the strain of rebuilding took its toll, Kathi felt compelled to walk into the service one Sunday at Edgewater Baptist Church, where she had never visited.

A church member who recognized the look of someone struggling with depression suggested to another member that Kathi needed a hug. That day, a bond formed, Kathi said.

"The church just took me in. They were God's people taking care of me," Kathi said.

Cole Gilbert, wife of pastor Chad Gilbert, took long walks with Kathi through their neighborhood, talking about God and faith. "She discipled me," Kathi said.

Soon, Kathi began to realize that God had led her into the church that day for a reason.

"Before, I was kind of an agnostic," Kathi said. "But not anymore."

Kathi prays for her husband's salvation and prays that God will use her to reach others. When she looks at the difference in her life since the storm, Kathi added, "Being part of God's family is the best thing that ever happened to me."

'Happiness more than anything'

Richard Scesny grew up in church but left it all behind when he joined the U.S. Navy as a young man. For decades, he lived "as far from God as you can imagine," Richard said.

As Hurricane Katrina barreled toward New Orleans, Richard, then 67, gathered up his mother, sister and a nephew, the nephew's wife and their two young children. With the cash savings he had at his house, Richard braved evacuation traffic, checking his family into a hotel 18 hours later in Beaumont, Texas.

As news reports over the next few days showed the deteriorating situation in New Orleans, Richard grew anxious. Fearful for his children, he prayed one evening, "Lord, we need some help."

The following morning, the family went to a restaurant for breakfast but drove off when they saw the line formed to the street. As they parked at a second restaurant, a woman pulled up behind them and asked if they were from New Orleans.

Beth Smith, wife of Robert Smith, pastor of Pinewood Baptist Church some 15 miles away, told Richard and his family that their church wanted to "adopt" a family from New Orleans.

Church members helped the Scesny family settle into a temporary home as they waited to return home to Marrero, on the west bank of the Mississippi River.

At Pinewood's prayer meeting days later, Richard knelt and committed his life to the Lord.

"I was all choked up and bawling like a baby," Richard said. "It was happiness more than anything else."

While in Pinewood, Hurricane Rita forced Richard and his family to evacuate once again. This time, Robert and Beth Smith took the Scesny family with them and headed north. Subsequently returning to Pinewood, Richard and his family found that the house they had stayed in had been spared the damage others had suffered.

Back home in Marrero weeks later, Richard sought out a Southern Baptist church. He passed Ames Boulevard Baptist Church and stopped, later telling his mother, "I've found the church for us."

Baptized at Ames Boulevard three months after the storm, Richard remains a faithful member.

Marilyn Stewart is a writer in New Orleans. This article first appeared in the Baptist Message (www.baptistmessage.com), newsjournal of the Louisiana Baptist Convention, as one of 15 stories in an... [Expand Bio]

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