

God in the Storm  
Baccalaureate Address  
St. Andrews University  
May 10, 2019  
Rev. John Cleghorn

What a pleasure and a blessing to be with you, the St. Andrews community, on this occasion. I have come to know this place and its people over the last several years. It's a joy to be invited to be with you.

Caldwell Presbyterian is so pleased to be a partner with St. Andrews. As should always be the case, our shared focus is you, the students. Through the witness of Lydia Randel and Julian Mobley last summer, our church family came to know the character, hard work, commitment and bright potential of St. Andrews students.

Now the pressure to keep up the momentum is on this summer's interns, Steffan Johnson and Nate Reavis Blackwel. Having met them, I am confident they will.

In a state full of great colleges and universities, St. Andrews and its predecessors have, over 123 years, played an important and unique role. You blend tradition with a forward-leaning view of the world. You attract students who know the meaning of an education and don't take one minute of it for granted. You play a role locally and in this multi-county area as a beacon and a center of higher learning.

But all that was practically blown away last fall. No sooner had you begun classes than Hurricane Florence arrived. We might call her a late enrollee for the academic year. Because she's been with you since she blew in.

Scotland County took a mighty hit – and St. Andrews with it. You staggered but you did not fall. Perhaps it was that Scottish fearsomeness that seeped long ago into the local soil, but you did not go down.

As the great philosopher Rocky Balboa said, "It's not how hard you hit. It's how hard you *get* hit, and keep getting up."

Florence did, however, shape the entire school year. Even before things had dried out, you all began the hard work of recovery and you learned the importance of adapting. Tomorrow, you seniors will receive degrees in everything from Business Administration to English, from History to Religion to Sports Management. But you ought to get credit for a minor - in resilience. You now know what it means to face a storm and come through it.

Each of you has a story. For my friend Lydia, the storm wiped out the fall golf season. Another of you seniors came back to campus only to find Florence had soaked everything you owned. Professors had to restructure their syllabi. Students in the Honors Program even jumped in to help the custodial staff. You all learned a lot about community – here on campus and the surrounding area.

I dare say Florence isn't the first storm you've faced. It won't be the last. But you overcame it as a class and as a community. You know more about who you are – individually and together.

That's the thing about storms – they have a way of testing who we really are. Storms reveal what parts of us lies on the surface ... and what can be blown away. Storms also reveal those parts of us that run the deepest, those elements of our character that aren't easily uprooted. These are the parts of ourselves that allow us to bend, as needed, but not break. Storms show who we really are.

My great grandfather knew about that. He was born just after the Civil War and grew up in rural Georgia amid reconstruction. Whatever education he got, he got at home from his parents and from reading the great books, the law and the Congressional Record at the local library.

As an adult, he shifted from farming to being a merchant. He moved from the Old-South City of Madison, Georgia, to the "frontier" northwest edge of the state in Rome. He died just a few weeks shy of 100. The family always said he wanted to avoid the ruckus.

His entire life, one might say, was one long storm of change, a cyclone of progress and advancement. In his century, he saw the arrival of the telephone, electricity, air travel, television, Charles Darwin, Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, Henry Ford, Adolph Hitler, nuclear energy, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and space travel.

For tens of thousands of years, the speed of humane progress had increased relatively little. But in his century, the pace quickened more in the realms of science and technology and social change than in all the million years of human life that came before.

Somehow, amidst the cyclone, my great grandfather stayed grounded. As everything around him changed, he was known always to be gracious, kind and courteous toward all – even as the South became more hard-edged. He was, to be sure, not an Old-South apologist. He didn't join in when others kept fighting the Civil War decades after Appomattox. He didn't defend the lost cause and spoke against those who did. Yes, he could have done more to right the grave wrongs of his time. But, at the very least, he was known for his Edwardian white mustache and for recognizing each person's humanity. He anchored his life in a few core principles. His advice my father

was always the same: “Remember to trust in the Lord, write to your mother, and vote the Democratic ticket.”

Above all, he practiced what my father called “loving cunning” – the kind of love that outwits hate. The truth of his life, as my dad wrote in an essay about him, was that, “All the world may change, but the human spirit in its best forms endures much the same always.”

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Whatever storms we face, that may be the most important thing. Yes, I know - what my great grandfather lived through must sound like ancient history to you. But the truth is that we all live through storms of change and progress. If he lived through a cyclone, then you will live through a hurricane. Not just Florence – but a wider storm.

What will the next century hold?

The convergence of people and machines will only quicken. Telephones will go the way of the buggy whip because we will simply transmit thoughts to one another. We will farm the oceans, not just for fish but with crops. An elevator will shuttle people to space and back. Humans will command the weather. Advancements in DNA research will stretch lifespans to approach immortality. I’m not making this up – scientists and other futurists say these things.

One prediction is that computer passwords will go away. That alone is enough for me.

The question for you, as it was for my great grandfather, is this: What will anchor you amidst the storm of progress in your lives? Will there be something outside yourself, something that is bigger than you, that will keep you rooted? Will you be able to keep the human spirit alive and practice love toward others even as you live lives we can hardly imagine? What has shaped you? What will ground you?

You are about to be college graduates. That will set you apart from many – and with it comes opportunity, privilege and responsibility. Most important, you are and always will be children of God – and God knows something about storms, as we heard in scripture earlier.

As Matthew read earlier in the Book of Genesis, God tamed primordial chaos and aligned the universe. By countless miracles, the earth spins on its axis and orbits the sun in just such a way that we humans get to exist.

And then there is the story Lydia read from the Gospel of Luke about the disciples setting out in a boat to cross the Sea of Galilee. You students will be crossing over into a new era. The disciples were just trying to cross the sea. And that was no small matter.

For them, the sea also held great danger. Think about the references to the sea in scripture. In the Old Testament, the sea was a place where storms swallowed people up, and sometimes, according to myth, big fish did, too.

So, when a storm blew up on the disciples that day from the story in Luke 8, the terror in their hearts was real. For them, such a storm even challenged the sovereignty of God.

When the storm raged, the disciples woke Jesus from a nap. I've always thought Jesus might have been a little tough on the disciples when he challenged them with the words, "Where is your faith?" Then again, I'd be a little irritated too if someone woke me up from a good nap.

But when Jesus calmed the seas and the skies with just a word, the disciples knew he was not of this earth. They knew the power of God was in him. And all of their days with Jesus after that, they knew they followed one who could deliver them through whatever tempests they encountered, be they real or social, of the spirit or of the soul, of the mind or of the body.

The same comfort is offered to us. Students, I won't presume to know about your faith lives. I am sure they vary widely. I know the church has let many in your generation down and failed to meet your expectations of what a group of God's people ought to be and do. Many of you may count yourselves among the "spiritual but not religious." I get that.

One of the things you have learned here is that faith in some form is vital to a whole and complete life. That is in the DNA here. You have walked the hallways and the grounds of a place built by tenacious Scots and others who valued the life of the mind. And it was here for you because, at times, it was too stubborn to fail. You have been educated by people who've invested themselves in you. Their hopes for the world go forward in you.

Because of Hurricane Florence, you you've learned, at least a little, about what you can do without and what is essential. You know what matters most and, I hope, you are in touch with what, in each of you, anchors your soul and your faith. In some way or another, you have helped this community rebound because you have had to sacrifice for the greater good.

For all of these reasons, as you leave here, take a little extra confidence in yourselves and your future. You took the best Florence could deliver and here you are. You've learned lessons most other schools did not offer this academic year.

Other storms by other names will come calling – in your careers, in your personal relationships, in your family life, in your own physical and mental and spiritual health. As with the disciples in the boat on the Sea of Galilee, there will be times when you wonder whether there really is a sovereign God. My advice is, as the disciples did, to stay in the boat and know that the storm will pass.

Whether you are a departing senior or will return next year, hold fast to what is good. Remember Jesus' admonition in another story that a house built on solid rock can withstand even the fiercest storms, just as St. Andrews did this year.

As with my great grandfather, try to bring a little grace, respect and courtesy into whatever you encounter. Practice the kind of loving cunning that outsmarts all those who would only advance hate and division.

If my great grandfather were standing here, he would say, "Remember to trust in the Lord, write your parents and always vote the Democratic ticket."

But you must determine the core principles that will anchor you in the winds and waves that will inevitably find you. Whatever you do, know that you go under the care of a God who loves you. Stand fast. And remember that,

"All the world may change, but the human spirit in its best forms endures."

Thanks be to God. Amen.