

## ***Fr. Caleb's Northfield Flood Journal***

Wednesday, Aug. 31

Last night our family walked down to the flood area. We met some families who we as a church are going to help. I am going to see them later this morning. The devastation is really beyond words especially in the countenance of the people. They seem both lamb and warrior, wounded but also ready for what is next. Saw no complaining, just helping and dignity in the squalor brought on by simple rain. The waterline in the neighborhood is about 6 feet in the front doors of the homes, maybe higher. At least one older couple stuck it out upstairs and waited for the dove to signal dry land. What were those hours like for them, three blocks away from us who were probably tucking the children in to bed? Some families are walking away from these homes, videotaping their ruin; rank sewage is the main smell, dumpsters and chain saws being moved around like clock work. As a family we only made it a block or so down this road, called, if you can believe it, Water Street. The smell conveyed lack of safety. And that is just it, helping people to a measure of safety--physically, mentally...spiritually is going to take even more time. Maybe 'helping' isn't strong enough for what we wish back upon life; 'Lord please undestroy my house, my road' is not going to happen. There is only a way through the Red Sea, no going back. But that is where all of us with our dry home homes, our safe jobs, our healthy dry kids, have to do a very simple thing: reach out. Let sighs BE action.

Thursday, Sept. 1

Spent yesterday with people on Water Street, a disaster zone. St. Jacob sent in two dumpsters so people could continue to triage their stuff--what can be saved, what has to go, etc. Thanks to Bob Allen's friend we helped get a bucket loader in which proved to be a real help. Norwich University has stepped up to the plate sending in workers including the rugby team. I am in a meeting at 8 a.m. with a kind of command center at the Square Biscuit (restaurant) on the green; I am sure new tasks and information will come out of that.

Friday, Sept. 2

Yesterday morning I was in an impressive meeting with town people who are leading the effort; our chair is the president of the Merchants Bank, Doreen, who also holds the mortgage to our house. If you've seen "Its a Wonderful Life" she's pretty much like Mr. Bailey. Anyway, we have communications people, volunteer coordinators, food coordinators, supply coordinators, carpenters, plumbers, heavy equipment people, technical people, etc. We now have a storefront which is a sort of mission command (near the bank so Doreen can go back and forth). That storefront is the old Sambel Realty in case you are looking for a place to drop supplies off or find out how to help.

After the meeting a man named Lonny, a retired police officer, asked me to stick with him for the day. He knows everybody and everyone and drives a full size pick up truck with sirens on top. Our first order of business was (Lonny and myself) to secure shipping

containers, pods for the people to keep their things dry because the rains are coming. So we did that, and the tractor trailers should be coming by this morning. It's supposed to rain this weekend.

Afterwards we were told of a house on Route 12 in the Falls that had a cardboard sign, "Help," out by the mailbox. So we went over there. The house is on the river; what spared the structure I do not know. A generator blasted away on the front porch near open windows which is extremely sketchy because you can die from carbon monoxide poisoning like that. We knocked on the door, no one home. Dogs were barking, 1,2,3,4. We turned off the generator and peered in through glass--stepping in the mud and debris we discovered all sorts of animals lived here, birds, rabbits, probably more (we never did get inside). We became fearful after some time went by because of the generator but the dog was a serious dog, probably friendly but pretty upset all the same. We didn't want to barge in so called the police and waited. In the wait I toured the river front; uprooted trees and reformed landscape is all there is, sad to say. Strange huge objects here and there. Then there was two doves, two white doves, fluttering around. Did they belong to the owners? What were they doing out? They landed on an enormous oak tree on its side, roots flailing in the air; they lifted and maneuvered through the wreckage and then landed by the now idle but steaming generator. What are these white doves? Lonny didn't know either.

"Fr. Caleb, maybe they're the people," he said.

In the flood aftermath what has been most alive is the piercing quality (the white of a bird against a dark back drop) of the human spirit. Something is made apparent, two windows flung open in a stuffy filthy room that draws out the image of God in us, that breath of life part we were given in the garden. To breathe and to move like a perfect white bird; the presence of this grace is abundant here today and probably will be for a while.

Tuesday, Sept. 6

It has been a week and a day since the flood. A Sunday Divine Liturgy has come and gone. The landscape is different, very different. The road most of you take to church is a refashioning though it is now traversable. We thank God for the work of the road crews; we are still in shock of what has come, what has changed us.

What do we do now? Yesterday we served the Akathist "Glory to God for All Things." We went down to Water Street after we delivered all the food St. Jacob parishioners made to the American Legion (which is coordinating food). Then we asked our friend Jim, who invited us and whose first floor and basement were destroyed, where we should sing. He showed us a soggy grassy area near port-o-potties and an "emergency" hot dog stand blasting rock and roll. We jokingly called it the village green though we lamented the lack of gazebo. Dn. Lasha and his family, Gabriel Clarke, Ann Regan...we all began singing after we set up three icon stations and asked the hot dog folks to turn off their radio for a bit.

It was glory. People in this post-deluge neighborhood hugged each other and sang along

(we passed out copies). Those who stood around were few; those who heard were many. For the second time I was really moved by soldiers. One stood listening, really listening, smoking a cigarette. Then he turned and went back to demolishing a house.

Many soldiers, cadets, hundreds of them, have been helping rebuild our town. On the way to Great Vespers on Saturday I saw a soldier running with a case of water; he ran like he was bringing water to the front lines of war. I would have pulled over and given him a ride but he seemed to have been upon his destination, and besides his run seemed sacred, like he needed to run like that for people who need water. I know it sounds sentimental and maybe it is for some of us but something sacred has been happening around here, authentically sacred, though it defies our categories.

Jodi Trout, a parishioner of Holy Resurrection in Claremont, NH, came down last week to volunteer for the day. Some in the St. Jacob family have come over too including Demetra who spent hours sorting fishing tackle for Mr. Trombley, the elderly man who road the storm out upstairs with his 80+ year old wife. The people are incredibly grateful for this help for a day, whatever needs to be done, help-for-a-day. Robert Lichowid, also from Holy Resurrection, came down and I asked him if he had any special skills (turns out he's a medic and a fire fighter). He knows small machines! It just so happened a small engine clinic just opened up and needed mechanics. He fixed 19 chain saws that day and the others while others fixed tractors, lawn mowers, you name it. Incredible. A stranger fixing your chain saw for free is a sacred act. Jim (the man who invited us to serve Akathist) had four feet water flowing through his music room (he used to be DJ). All of his stereo equipment is destroyed along with many albums he has collected for decades. He reached up to shelf, about 5 feet off the ground, and gently put something in my hands: a Celtic cross. It happened to be on a shelf just above the flowing river. He had only a few things left and he wanted me to have his cross. Sacred.

We will not be stopping our loving acts for our town and surrounding towns and we continue to appreciate the support you are giving. You have given thousands and that is good because I have spent thousands, much of it on helping people clear out their first floors. We also ordered some pods, shipping containers, so people can keep things dry and safe. Many cannot jump in the car and go lend a physical hand at this time. Many live far away from all this. And we need to remember that for all our sorrows with our floods great tragedy looms elsewhere, far more severe (the present famine in Africa for example, where they predict three quarter million deaths unless something drastic is not done). Our options are not limited here in our own back yard.