

Hurricane effect: Worshiping through the storm

by [Heidi Neumark](#) in the [October 4, 2011](#) issue



A subway station closed for Hurricane Irene. [Attribution Some rights reserved](#) by [jayKayEss](#).

Most churches in the New York area closed down as Hurricane Irene approached. This made sense. We were in what the news reports called the "cone of uncertainty," so there was no way to know what the hurricane might bring on Sunday morning. The mayor ordered the shutdown of all New York City subway lines and buses. In many cases, the clergy themselves had no good way to get to church and wouldn't want to encourage their congregants to come out in unsafe conditions.

My circumstance was a bit different. I don't have to go outside to get to church; I just go down the stairs next to our kitchen. Besides, we have a shelter in our church for LGBTQ youth who are homeless. They had ridden out the storm inside, watching movies, listening to music and dancing in the church undercroft. Since several of them regularly attend worship, why cancel it?

Sunday morning dawned, and I was glad to see that the undercroft had not flooded as it had a few weeks earlier during a heavy rain. The repair job held up. There was a mouse in the kitchen sink, but nothing else out of the ordinary. Things had not gone so well for a Saturday night shelter volunteer who drove down from New Haven, then received a call telling him that a tree had crashed through his apartment wall. He couldn't drive back because the highways were closed, so he prepared a delicious cake for after church.

I set up for the first service of the day, Wee Worship, just in case worshipers showed up. We usually follow the lectionary, but I decided to tell the story of Noah and the ark. There were only five of us, but the children who came had never heard the story before, and it was exciting to share it with them. I read the story, we sang it and then they retold it using a wooden ark of mine.

When the children came to the description of the dove, they asked me where the dove was. I showed them the dove painted on the side of the ark. That was not good enough. Leni took one of the toy rabbits and made it fly through the air, her makeshift bird teaching me to see the world's possibilities anew. I was glad that I hadn't decided to stay home.

Eighteen showed up for the next service. My preaching text was the story of Moses and the burning bush. I was struck by the way that Moses looked and saw the bush, and then turned aside for a second look. It was in the turning aside that he began to realize God was up to something. I didn't know that a hurricane would force me to turn aside. On Sunday mornings I'm usually looking to see that everything is ready, battening down the cone of uncertainty and doing what has to be done for God, so I have scant time to pay attention to what God is up to. This Sunday was different.

It was wonderful to see Nick, whose new job requires him to work from 10 a.m. to 8 p.m. every Sunday. Thanks to the storm, his office had shut down and he could come to worship. Jobi came by during coffee hour. He had come the day before to tell me that he had just gotten an HIV-positive diagnosis and he wanted prayers. I asked him where he was staying. He hadn't heard anything about the hurricane despite the nonstop news and was planning to sleep on his usual bench with his umbrella. There was only an hour before the trains shut down—just enough time to give him a Metro Card and the address of a temporary storm shelter. He returned on Sunday to thank me. The shelter had been great, he said. He asked for more prayers, prayers I had time to say with him, and he joined us for cake and coffee.

A woman who said she didn't think any churches were open came in requesting prayers. She had a long list of concerns, and I had time to listen. I had time to pray. I had time to turn aside. A mom, dad and two children I'd never met came in. They were out on a posthurricane walk to see what the storm had done. The little girl had a feather and her brother had a small leafy branch, like the rabbit/dove had brought back to Noah. The parents told me that the children were baptized but had never been to church again. They were thinking about changing that. I told them about our

opportunities for children and gave them our Wee Worship flyer. The father pointed to the phrase "Squirmers welcome!" and said, "That's for us!"

I introduced the children to Elmo the turtle, who hadn't had breakfast yet. The little girl asked if she could feed Elmo. She told me about the frogs she had seen in the country. I turned aside. I bent down. I listened. She waved goodbye to Elmo, and her parents said they'd be back next week.

I didn't turn aside to find a burning bush, but I did see flickers of God at work. My prayers go out to all who have suffered flooding, injury and severe losses as a result of Irene. The hurricane visited a watery chaos upon an extensive region. But in a small corner of Manhattan, we saw that God is at work even in such difficult times, creating and sending out light in every direction.