Eye of the Storm
A sermon by the Revd Dr Sam Wells

In March 1990 the Five Nations rugby union championship lay in the balance. Scotland and England had both won all their matches, and England travelled to Edinburgh knowing that the winner would take the coveted Grand Slam. The game is remembered as perhaps the finest in Scottish rugby history. But the defining moment came before it started. The England players ran on to the field to a largely hostile reception. But the Scots’ captain David Sole did something different. He led his team out at a stately walking pace. It was an iconic moment. It said, ‘There’s nothing you can throw at us we can’t deal with. We’re going to win this game, and we’re going to walk right towards you, and we will not be overcome.’ And that’s exactly what happened. England threw everything at Scotland; but to no avail. And David Sole’s walk became part of Scottish folklore.

Think about that walk for a moment. Take away the furore of the crowd. Take away the intimidation of a stronger and more vaunted opposition. Take away the reservation that sport is only a game and the suspicion that all this competitive energy is displaced from somewhere less tangible but more important. Just stay with the walk. Get into David Sole’s mind. This is the defining moment of my life. In this case, a defining moment in my nation’s cultural life. Somehow a cluster of events have brought it about that what happens in the next two hours will be my identity, my legacy, my single truth. And I’m walking slowly towards it. I’m entering the eye of the storm.

When Paul writes to the Galatians he’s talking about such a moment. He’s talking about the eye of a storm. The storm is this. Jesus has come into the world, but the world has received him not. Jesus has come to his own people, but his own people have comprehended him not. The leaders of those people have got the Romans to string Jesus up in a cursed and humiliating and agonising death. They’ve taken the most beautiful gift and most gracious gesture and most loving treasure and dashed it to the ground, treading its remnants underfoot. And when Jesus rises from the dead and sends his Spirit to raise up disciples of Jew and Gentile to be his body, the storm isn’t over. Fanatical vigilante leaders of the special people take it upon themselves to exterminate the disciples, eradicate the followers, destroy all who bear the name of the risen Lord. And in the eye of the storm is Paul, most fanatical of the chosen ones. And the Spirit is like David Sole. The Spirit walks straight towards Paul. The Spirit ignores the crowd, the hostility, the heritage, the rhetoric, the vitriol. The Spirit of God walks right into the eye of the storm and starts its work of transformation with Paul himself.

Nine months before David Sole’s iconic walk, Tiananmen Square was filled with pro-democracy protestors. The government in Beijing cracked down, and on 4 June, 1989, troops cleared the square of the student-led demonstrations. Hundreds, perhaps thousands, of people met violent deaths. 24 hours later the square was largely empty of protestors. On that day an enormous column of tanks was making its way down one of the avenues leading into the square when a lone protestor stood in front of the lead tank. In a gesture that’s come to crystallise Tiananmen Square, the summer of 89, and the pro-democracy movement worldwide, the man walked slowly toward the tank. It was one of the defining moments of the twentieth century. No one ever identified who he was. But the whole world understood what that gesture meant. He was confronted by uncompromising, ruthless, single-minded, unswerving power. And he walked slowly, calmly
towards it. He didn’t deny it, dodge it, deceive it, escape it, work around it, give in to it. He walked towards it. He walked into the eye of the storm.

I wonder what that man’s witness means to you. Take away the global attention. Take away the glamour of a primal confrontation. Just focus on the tank, the symbol of unstoppable, inevitable suppression, and this fragile man walking towards it. Just contemplate walking towards the eye of the storm.

I wonder if you’re facing a storm right now. Maybe you’re in a situation at work where everyone’s under terrific pressure and there’s unreasonable demands or illegal practices or exploitative expectations or exhausting responsibilities or burdensome duties or terrifying challenges. Perhaps you wake up at night, sweating, worrying, not knowing how to think straight, who to talk to, what to do first, how to see beyond your terror. Or it could be you’re facing a crisis closer to home. You’re facing an illness, and it’s serious, maybe very serious, and may only get worse. Or a relationship or a plan on which much was staked is in the fire of agony or in the balance of indecision. Your life, or the joy in your life, or the well-being of someone you treasure, seems to hang by a thread. Maybe the moment isn’t right now, the storm isn’t exactly overhead – but you can see it coming. You know it’s heading toward you. Maybe right this moment now you realise you’ve actually seen it coming a long time. A long time.

And all your instincts are to dodge, to escape, to deny, to dive for cover, to find a way out, to run away. Of course they are. We’re surrounded with gadgets and opportunities to fly away into distraction, into alternative realities, into fantasy, into thinking about anything but what’s in front of us. Everything is telling us to avoid this moment, to close our eyes and wait for it to go away, to let it sort itself out, to go to sleep and discover it was all a bad dream, to invite an ethereal parent or fairy godmother to wish this moment away.

Could it possibly be that God is calling you on this occasion, gently, quietly, not to deny, flee, distract, pretend, but to walk slowly, purposely, intentionally, towards the eye of the storm? Of course some dramas are best avoided, some wounds are not things to dwell on. But for each one of us, I believe there’s a David Sole moment, a defining storm we’re called to walk towards, a storm in which everything we are and are called to be comes together in a moment we can’t avoid or deny. Maybe you’re facing such a moment right now.

Given that it’s against all our instincts, let’s take a little inventory of what walking towards the storm would mean. Stand before that column of tanks for a moment, and think about what it would mean to start gently walking towards them.

It would mean going into your bottomless fear, naming it, facing the worst thing that could happen, feeling the impact of that worst thing, and then trusting that God will meet you on the far side of your fear, so that you go through and beyond your fear and out the other side. That’s courage. Trembling courage.

It would mean facing up to the unspeakable waste, the dream of what your life was supposed to be, the template for what you thought God had in store for you, the good things you thought you were entitled to hope for, the goals and prospects and options, and instead focusing on just this one thing you’re walking towards as perhaps the only thing God wants you to concentrate on right now, and believing that God will look after the rest. That’s trust. Quavering trust.

It would mean entering into the convulsing grief, the loss, the fear of separation, of isolation, of being forgotten, of not mattering any more, of being snuffed out like a candle, of an ending not of your choosing, of it seeming to many or all as if you’d never been, of having no meaning to your life except as God makes for you, and believing that that’s all that counts. That’s faith. Shuddering faith.

It would mean accepting the prospect of harrowing pain, of physical, visceral hurt, of uncertain duration, of unpredictable depth, of relentless intensity, with no protection except the everlasting arms, and believing those arms will never let you go. That’s hope. Quaking hope.
Fear, waste, grief, pain. That’s what it means to walk towards the storm. Courage, trust, faith, hope. That’s what we look for in the defining moments of our lives.

This isn’t the way our contemporary culture teaches us to address the storm. Our culture teaches us to fix the problem. If we can’t fix the problem, learn better techniques, apply stronger systems, use more advanced technology. In other words, find a way to control the storm. We live in a culture that believes in controlling the storm – that imagines that one day every storm will be subject to our control. We live in a culture that has nothing to tell us about a storm we can’t control – a culture that tries to manage storms so as to make virtues like courage, trust, faith, and hope unnecessary.

But maybe that’s precisely what you’re facing today. A storm you can’t control. At work. At home. In your body. In your mind. In what God’s calling you to. A storm you can’t fix. A storm you can’t manage. A storm that is coming right towards you.

And what we see in Galatians is that God walks toward that storm – like the man in Tiananmen Square, walking toward the column of tanks, like David Sole walking purposefully, intentionally, onto the Murrayfield turf. Maybe you can’t escape, maybe it’s useless retreating into a fantasy world, maybe this is something that isn’t going to go away by itself. Maybe it’s time for a different approach. An approach of faith, and hope, and love. Maybe it’s time to walk towards it. And maybe that means naming, entering, and going through and beyond your bottomless fear, maybe it involves accepting, reckoning with and accounting for the unspeakable waste, maybe it includes feeling, shouldering, and understanding the convulsing grief, maybe it requires living with, enduring, and incurring the harrowing pain.

Why? Because God so loved the world that Jesus walked towards the eye of the storm. Jesus didn’t deny, avoid, or escape Jerusalem. Jesus walked towards Jerusalem, as if it were a field of combat or an oppressor’s tank. And Jesus took up his cross and walked towards Golgotha, beyond trembling fear, in spite of criminal waste, amidst echoing grief, embodying terrible pain. Jesus walked slowly, purposefully, intentionally, into the eye of the storm, because only through the storm would he find what he was truly looking for.

And what he was truly looking for was... us. He kept his eyes on the prize – and the prize was us. When God went into the eye of the storm of hostility and rejection and distrust and fury to find Paul, it was because that’s what God does. God walks toward the storm to meet us.

And that’s why we walk toward the storm – in trust, in resolution, in hope. Because God’s walking toward the storm too – from the other side. There’s no fantasy or denial or escape in God. God knows the way to us lies via the cross. God’s walking into the eye of the storm to meet us. We walk into the eye of the storm for one reason only. To meet God.

At one time or another, each one of us faces a moment when it’s time for us to drop our fantasy and denial and escape, and ourselves walk towards the storm. Because it’s in the eye of that storm that we shall finally, fully, and forever meet God.