

Real Life Stories
The Miraculous Survival of Missionaries - Typhoon Haiyan - Philippines

TACLOBAN, Philippines—Suzie Miller sat on her mattress, floating on the second level of her flooding home, not knowing whether she and her husband would survive Typhoon Haiyan.

But Suzie and her husband, Carl – who serve among the 26 IMB missionaries assigned to the Philippines – knew they were exactly where God wanted them: in their home in Tacloban during the massive storm.

Suzie said the entire experience was a testament to God’s provision and the power of prayer. The Millers had just returned to Tacloban from Cebu City, where they had the option to remain until the typhoon passed. But they believed God wanted them to go home to Tacloban.

As the typhoon engulfed the Tacloban peninsula on Friday, November 8th 2013, Suzie said it sounded like a semitrailer was passing. The torrential wind and rain shattered glass windows in their home and water began pouring in from the deluge and from storm surge waves pushed inland from the ocean. The first thing Suzie grabbed was a prayer journal she has had since college. Upstairs, the Millers climbed with their two dogs onto a mattress floating in the water in their bedroom.

For Suzie’s birthday on Nov. 3rd, her son and daughter-in-law bought Dr Peppers – a rare treat in the Philippines, and a favorite of the Millers. IMB missionaries Stan and Dottie Smith also had given the Millers Dr Peppers as a birthday present.

Stranded on their mattress, Suzie said she and Carl felt like they were dying of thirst as the wind and rain torpedoed their home. Prior to the storm Suzie placed the three Dr Peppers from her son on a desk. As the water rose in their room, the Dr Peppers floated over to the mattress.

“We just opened a Dr Pepper and shared it,” Suzie said. “There is nothing that helps you out like drinking Dr Pepper in a storm.”

THE POWER OF PRAYER

Suzie said God brought a Scripture verse to her mind during the experience: “Save me, O God! For the waters have come up to my neck” (Psalm 69:1, ESV). “I never thought about literally praying that prayer.”

The water level in the Miller’s split-level home rose to more than 7 feet deep. They watched as their furniture bobbed up and down.

“We were praying for God’s mercy, but also realizing, if we didn’t make it, we chose to leave Cebu and come back. We felt very confident in that decision. We trusted Him to take care of us, whatever His will was.”

That confidence didn’t keep her from feeling afraid at times, Suzie said. Surge after surge of water pummeled their home. “When the water was coming up, we had no idea if we were going to survive or not,” she said. Suzie suggested to Carl that they crawl out the window to escape their flooding house. “Honey, we can’t get out – if we get out, we will die,” Carl said.

The typhoon’s winds were so strong, they broke gauges used to measure their speed. As the Millers weathered the onslaught in their home, a close friend clung to the rafters of what remained of his house, hanging on for dear life as wave after wave pummeled him. He miraculously survived.

“I hate to be closed in – that whole panic of being closed in and trapped and drowning,” Suzie said. “My husband, he was such a dear, he said, ‘You know, we just pray and we ask God to save us and that is all we can do.’”

Suzie said they started praying out loud. “I’ve heard of folks crying out to God, and that is what we did – we were crying out to God.”

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After the Millers cried out to God the water began to recede, but another wave soon poured in. The couple continued praying, the water receded and did not rise again.

"We saw all of our furniture floating around ... and then it all settled down," Suzie said. "God saved us."

THANKSGIVING TURKEY

After the rain and water subsided, the Millers crawled out of a window, but they quickly retreated back inside because the wind was still so powerful that it hurt when it hit their skin.

A car was washed up against their back door. The Miller's car was wedged in their fence.

Their couch was on top of their piano. Their china cabinet fell, one end propped against their stationary bike. Suzie said their only dishes that broke were cheaper items purchased recently; the 33-year-old dishes from their wedding survived unscathed.

Despite the tragedy, God brought the Millers moments of humor. Carl lost his glasses in the storm and had to wear Suzie's pink pair. Most of Carl's shoes washed away – all he could find was one boot, so he borrowed a purple sandal of Suzie's to wear outside.

Of 200 books the Millers own, a copy of David Jeremiah's "What in the World is Going On" was plastered on the wall. Their dining room table floated up, remained level and then floated back down as the water eventually receded. Amazingly, all of the items on the table did not fall off into the water.

The Miller's freezer also floated through their home. Remarkably, the freezer remained sealed, preserving a turkey they had purchased for the upcoming holidays. Instead of keeping the turkey for themselves, the Millers gave the poultry to their neighbors who were struggling to feed their family. The neighbors prepared the turkey and insisted the Millers come and join them for "turkey adobo." (Adobo is a popular seasoning used in the Philippines.) A Christmas warehouse released its storage of queso, macaroni and canned fruit cocktail, and the Millers and their neighbors ate those foods as side dishes.

"This is our Thanksgiving turkey, we are giving thanks that we all survived," Suzie told her neighbors. "It really was thanksgiving for survival." The neighbors in their immediate vicinity all survived. Through the experience, Suzie said she learned the true meaning of community.

Five Bible school students in need of shelter stayed with the Millers during the weekend, helped move the mud out of their home, and moved and cleaned their furniture.

The neighbors shared their washing boards and soap with her, since her cleaning supplies were lost. Washing clothes together quickly led to a time of community, with everyone sharing their stories of survival. The community shared tools, gasoline, food and other supplies with one another. Everyone shared everything they had.

The Millers' church is located on the opposite side of town, and they didn't know whether it survived. On Sunday, four church members walked almost five miles through debris and dead bodies to see if the Millers and other church members were alive and well.

"It was a great time to see Filipinos care for each other," Suzie said. "It is kind of like Acts; everyone had everything in common, and no one had anything that was their own."

NO REGRETS

Suzie said she never doubted the decision to return to Tacloban. “It wasn’t ‘Oh why, oh why did we come back?’” she said. “It was just a peace.” It was important to go through the tragedy with her neighbors rather than leaving and letting the neighbors go through the tragedy alone. If they did that, she said, “You come back as an outsider to minister.” Instead, the Millers experienced the life-changing disaster with the people they love and serve. Without cell phone access or electricity, they heard they could make phone calls at the airport. On Monday they set off on foot, walking for several miles.

They found their beloved city decimated. They walked past leveled homes and corpses. The house next to theirs was gone. Tin, boards, nails and wires littered the streets. They passed a home that had caved in; the corpses of the family remained inside, crushed. Entire communities were wiped out. Cars were upside down. A mini-semitrailer rested on top of a tree. Around the beach areas, only coconut trees remained. Gnarled steel girders protruded from spaces where buildings once stood. People tried to bathe in standing water on the road. “It was just destruction, everywhere you looked”.

PEACE IN DESTRUCTION

The Millers knew they were being blanketed in prayer. Prior to the storm, they sent an email to their network of churches in South Carolina and Texas asking for prayer. They also had requested prayer from their extended family. Email inboxes buzzed with prayers and well-wishes for the Millers, as did Facebook and Twitter feeds. “We could really tell that people were praying. There was such an uncanny peace in the midst of everything happening. I think it is the grace that God gives when you are in a crisis situation. He walks through it with you, we just knew God was in control.”

The Millers boarded a military aircraft on Tuesday for Manila, where they are recuperating and making plans for relief work. Staying in Tacloban became dangerous after the storm passed, as looting and violence over the lack of food was increasing. The delivery of aid supplies to the island had been slow. There was a lack of water, food and phone service. They hoped to return and help their community rebuild.

Suzie said she and her husband are praying that they "would do things to give God all the glory, and that He would be the focus of this, and not us."

She asked prayer:

- For the Waray Waray people, who the Millers serve in the Philippines
- For the Lord to guide their next steps and give direction on where He wants them to go
- For their family in the U.S.

. . . . Gleaned from Baptist Press (November 2013)