Sunday, June 22, 1997
LIVING THROUGH A STORM
Mark 4:35-41

What do you do when you find yourself in the middle of a storm? That was the predicament the disciples of Jesus found themselves in one night, and it's something that can and does happen to all of us.

The storms in life come in many forms — thunderstorms, wind storms, hurricanes, floods, a building blown up by a bomb, a sudden illness, the death of someone you love, the loss of a job, a child getting into trouble, personal bankruptcy, a broken relationship, divorce, betrayal of trust, and many more.

Here's what happened to the disciples according to the story in Mark's gospel. Jesus had been teaching large numbers of people, including his disciples. It was the end of the day. He was tired, and his listeners were tired. Mark notes that Jesus only taught "as long as they were able to hear it." He knew when to end the sermon. He knew that pouring water into an already overflowing cup doesn't really give you any more water.

This reminds me of another time in Jesus' ministry when he said to his listeners, "I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now."

Words spoken before people are ready for them, or after people have already heard enough, are more easily not heard at all, or misunderstood. Worse still, they can place a heavy burden on the listeners, which they are not ready to carry. A poor teacher, for example, might overwhelm us with an avalanche of facts that we cannot yet assimilate or for which there has been no preparation or foundation.

Patiently, and moderating his pace to theirs, Jesus taught his disciples and others, leading them but not overwhelming them.

The Christian life is something like that. It is frequently a gradual growth and training — a wading deeper and deeper into the truth. As we make our journey of faith, every turn along the way opens up new views and vistas, and we assimilate them, grow, and mature. To be born again is only the beginning. No one can be born again and reach instant maturity. We need to continue growing and seeking new truth.

In our day-to-day relationships, it's easy to speak too soon and say too much. As I look back, I realize that as a parent, while our children were growing up, I often spoke too soon and gave too much quick advice when most of the time, they weren't asking for advice but for understanding.

Jesus knew when to stop teaching. He also knew when to get away and rest. So that evening, he said to his disciples, "Let us go across to the other side," meaning the other side of the Sea of Galilee. It was time for a change of scenery and a change of pace. This decision was made with supreme assurance. He didn't worry about what he might miss by going across to the other side or what would become of the crowd. He knew he had fed them the food of "Good News." He could leave, well-assured that they had nourishing images to ponder for some time to come.

Almost as soon as they left the shore in their boat, Jesus fell asleep. He was at peace with himself, with God, and with his mission.

How many times have you found yourself unable to sleep because you were not at peace? Sleeplessness must be a big problem in our culture. Look at all the products we have developed to help us sleep. There are sleeping pills, herbal sleep remedies, sleep music, white noise machines, earplugs, eye shades, adjustable beds, water beds, air beds, sleep clinics, and more.

Yet here is Jesus, in a creaky boat, sound asleep almost as soon as they leave the shore. Then, a sudden storm arises on the lake, and still, he sleeps. It wasn't the storm or the tossing boat that awakened him.

As I was studying this story, I discovered an ancient Near Eastern tradition of recognizing that sleep and rest are divine characteristics, not signs of human weakness. A sleeping god indicates divinity undisturbed by other powers or storms. Only an unchallenged, supremely authoritative deity dares to lie down and sleep soundly.

But the disciples were not at peace. Even though they were seasoned fishermen and used to sudden storms on the Sea of Galilee, they were deeply afraid. They shook Jesus awake and said, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" He woke up, rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, "Peace! Be still." The storm subsided, and he said to them, "Why are you afraid? Have you no faith?"

Stories like this were remembered by the early church not only because of their unusual circumstances but also because of the lessons they teach. Stories are one of the best ways to remember basic truths. Here are some truths about God that this story helps us remember:

The first truth is that this story illustrates human stress in a concrete way — the fact that all of us face storms in life. As mentioned earlier, these storms come in many forms, not just bad weather. There are storms of sudden illness, the death of someone you love, the loss of a job, a child getting into trouble, a broken relationship, betrayal, and more.

Furthermore, these storms frequently come when we are doing what we've been asked to do. The disciples were not embarking on some foolish enterprise. Jesus had asked them to take him to the other side of the lake, and they were doing as he asked.

Hasn't this been your experience? Some of the worst storms in your life, the biggest obstacles, the most trouble, have come when you were doing what you were supposed to be doing. Here's someone faithfully carrying out her job, and all of a sudden, disaster strikes. The trouble is not of her making. The wind is against her. Such storms come into the lives of the righteous and the unrighteous alike.

One of the most common misconceptions is that if we work hard enough, we can get our lives into such a favorable situation that we won't have any storms or problems. Most of us have an idealized picture of how life ought to be when it's "normal," and that picture usually excludes difficulties or troubles. There are no storms, no surprises — just sunshine every day. But life is not like that. It never has been and never will be. Life is difficult. Life is complex. Life is unfair. There are sudden, violent storms that can almost wipe us out.

When these storms come, our little boat can seem so small and vulnerable, and the sea of life so large and unpredictable. When the wind rises, the waves grow, and the boat rocks, we feel helpless and at the mercy of the forces around us.

The second truth this story helps us remember is that in the storms of life, the power of God is in the boat with us. And this power, even if it seems to be sleeping, will awaken when we call. When the limits of our human resources have been reached, when we know there's nothing more we can do, God is waiting. This is the good news of the Christian faith.

We human beings cannot save ourselves by our own power. God is always needed if our lives are to be complete. It was reported that when King Tut's tomb was opened in Egypt many years ago, wheat was discovered that had been in the dry darkness for more than 4,000 years. When it was brought out and planted, it grew and multiplied. All it needed to release its power was to be in the right relationship with the earth, sun, and rain.

In the same way, we are limited until we get into the right relationship with God and others. The good news is that God has taken the initiative in making this relationship right and is waiting for us to respond.

Sometimes, however, we don't realize this until, like the disciples, we find ourselves adrift with the wind against us and the waves high. Then we realize we cannot do it alone. We need God and others. That's the deep wisdom in the first two steps of A.A.: (1) We admitted we were powerless over alcohol, that our lives had become unmanageable. (2) Came to believe that a power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity. Oftentimes, it takes a painful, graphic experience to teach us this truth, and even then, some of us need reminding again and again.

Do you remember the story of the Titanic? People widely believed that the unsinkable ship had been built. That ship was a striking symbol of our excess pride. We're told that the band kept playing as the ship sank, not necessarily out of bravery but because they simply couldn't believe the ship would sink. The crew had difficulty convincing the passengers that the ship was doomed.

A third truth this story conveys is that even though our faith may be small and weak, God is ready and willing to help. The disciples woke Jesus and, with fear in their voices, asked, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" Then, instead of criticizing them, he said, "Peace! Be still!" to the wind and the waves. And there was a dead calm. Only then did he say to the disciples, "Why are you afraid? Have you no faith?" I'm sure he said these words not in a critical tone but in a reassuring one.

God comes to us beyond our hope when we are in need and despite our lack of faith.

There's another similar story in Matthew's gospel. The disciples had gone ahead to the other side of the Sea of Galilee while Jesus had gone into the hills to pray. A storm on the lake threatened their boat, and they were afraid they would perish. Then they saw someone coming toward them, walking on the water. At first, they were even more afraid. Then Jesus spoke to them, "Take heart; it is I. Have no fear."

In this story, when Peter heard these reassuring words, he wanted to walk to meet Jesus. Like many of us, Peter was both courageous and wavering in his faith. He stepped out of the boat onto the water and began to walk; his faith was strong at first, and it remained strong as long

as he kept his eyes straight ahead on Jesus. But he made the mistake of looking down, and once he saw the waves and felt the wind, his faith faltered, and he began to sink.

This happens to all of us. Sometimes, in the storms of life, when our faith is strong, we feel as if we can walk on water — we are on top of the crisis, and we find ourselves doing things we never thought we could do. But if we stop and begin to worry, if we dwell on the difficulties and problems ahead and how much there is yet to be done — in other words, if we start to look down and wonder how we're going to make it — then we begin to falter and sink.

It's said that in the days of the large sailing vessels, when a new hand climbed the narrow rope ladder to the crow's nest, the old hands would shout, "Look up. Look up!" If the lad looked down, he might very well become dizzy and fall.

So these stories of the storms in the disciples' lives are closely related to our everyday experiences. First, all of us face storms of one kind or another. They cannot be avoided. Second, the power of God is present and waiting in the midst of those storms. Third, even though our faith can falter and be weak, God's power is still available to us if we ask. Amen.