Book 34

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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 in which the disciples of Jesus found themselves one night and it's something that can and does happen to all of us.

The storms in life come in many forms--thunderst-orms, 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 gets into trouble, you find yourself facing person-al bankruptcy, a broken relationship, divorce, someone you trusted betrays that 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 in addition to 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 comment from Mark's gospel reminds me of another time in the ministry of Jesus 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 are misunderstood

or 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 which we cannot as 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 yet 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 on the way opens up new views and vistas to us, and we assimilate them and grow and mature. To be born again is only a beginning. No one can be

born again and reach instant maturity. One needs to continue to grow and seek new truth.

In our day to day relationships with each other, it's so easy for us to speak too soon and say too much. As I look back, I'm sure that as a parent as our children were growing up, I frequently spoke too soon, had too much quick advice to give when most of the time they were not asking for advice but for understanding.

Jesus knew when to stop teaching. He also knew when to get away and rest. So on 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 as well as a change of pace. This decision was made with supreme assurance. He

didn't worry over 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 chew on for some time to come.

Almost as soon as they left the shore in their boat, he 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? Not being able to sleep must be a big problem in our culture. Look at all the products we have developed to aid us in our quest for sleep. There are sleeping pills, herbal sleep remedies, sleep music, white noise machines, earplugs and eye-

shades, adjustable beds, water beds, air beds, sleep clinics and more.

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

As I was studying the background of this story this week, I discovered there is an ancient Near Eastern tradition of recognizing that sleep and rest are in fact divine characteristics, not signs of human weakness. A sleeping God indicates divinity that is undisturbed by other powers or storms. Only an unchallenged, supremely authoritative diety dare lie down and sleep soundly.

But the disciples were not at peace. Even though they were seasoned fishermen and were used to sudden storms on the Sea of Galilee, they were deeply afraid. They shook him awake and said, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" He woke up and 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 such as this one were remembered by the early church not only because of their unusual circumstances, but also because of what the stories teach. The use of stories is one of the best ways for us to remember basic truths. Here are some of the truths about God that this story helps us to remember.

The first truth is: this story illustrates in a concrete way human stress--the fact that all us of face storms in our life. As indicated earlier, these storms come in many forms, not only storms caused by bad weather. There are the storms of sudden illness, the death of somone you love, the loss of a job, a child gets into trouble, a broken relationship, divorce, someone you trust betrays you and more.

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

Hasn't this been your experience? Some of the

worst storms in your life, some of the biggest obstacles, the most trouble has come to you when you are doing what you are supposed to be doing. Here's an individual who is faithfully carrying out her job and all of a sudden disaster strikes. The trouble is not of her own making. The wind is against her. Such storms come into the lives of the righteous and the unrighteous.

One of the most common misconceptions of our times is that if we only work hard enough, we can finally get our lives into such a favorable situation that we will not have any storms or problems. Most of us have an idealized picture for how our life ought to be when it is normal. This picture usually excludes difficulties or troubles of any sort. There are no storms. There are no surprises. There is sunshine everyday. But life is not

like that. It never has been and it never will be, not in this world. Life is difficult. Life is complex. Life is unfair. There are sudden violent storms that almost wipe us out.

And when these storms come, sometimes our little boat seems so small and vulnerable and the sea of life so large and unpredictable. When the wind rises and 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 to remember is: in the storms that come to us in this life, the power of God is in the boat with us. And this power, even though it is sleeping, will wake up at our call. When the limits of our human resources have been reached, when we know there is noth-

ing more that we can do, then God is waiting. This is the good news of the Christian faith.

We human beings cannot save ourselves on 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, some wheat was discovered that had been there 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 get into the right relationship with the earth, the sun and the rain.

In the same way as that wheat was limited in what it could do until it got into the right relationship with the earth, the sun and the rain, so also we human beings are limited until we get into the

right relationship with God and others. The further good news is that God has taken the initiative in making this relationship right and is waiting for us to respond.

Sometimes however, we do not realize this fact until, like the disciples, we find ourselves adrift, with the wind against us and the waves high in the middle of a storm. Then we come to the realization that we cannot do it on our own. 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 would restore us to sanity." Oftentimes it takes a very painful and graphic experience to teach us this truth, and even then, some of us have to be reminded over

and over again.

Do you remember the story of the Titanic? It was widely believed that the unsinkable ship had been built. That ship was a striking symbol of our excess pride. Thus we are told that the band kept playing as the ship sank, not necessarily out of bravery, but because they simply could not believe that the ship would sink. The crew at first had difficulty in convincing the passengers that the ship was doomed.

A third truth carried in this story is that even though our faith is small and weak, God is ready and willing to help. The disciples woke Jesus and with fear in their voice 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 of voice but in a reassuring one.

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

There's another similiar story in Matthew's gospel. The disciples had gone toward to 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 will perish. Then they saw someone coming to them, walking across the water. At first they were 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 at the same time his faith wavered. Even though he stepped out of the boat onto the water and began to walk; though his faith was strong as he began, and it remained strong as long as he kept his eyes straight ahead on Jesus; 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 and we feel as if we can walk on water; we can be on top of the crisis, and we find ourselves doing all sorts of things that we would've never thought we could do. But then if we stop in the middle of

what we are doing and begin to worry; if we stop and think of all the difficulties and problems ahead and how much there is yet to be done--in other words, if we begin to look down and wonder how we're going to make it, then we begin to falter and sink.

It is said that in the days of the large sailing vessels, when a new hand climbed the narrow rope ladder to the crow's next, 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 which came into the lives of the disciples are very much related to our everyday life. 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 all the storms. Third, even though our faith can falter and be weak, God's power is still available to us if we ask. Amen.