Sunday, June 22, 2003
SURVIVING LIFE'S STORMS
Mark 4:35-41

Storms can enter your life suddenly in many ways — thunderstorms, windstorms, hurricanes, floods, a building blown up by a bomb, a fire, an illness, a divorce, the death of someone you love, the loss of a job, your child gets into trouble, bankruptcy, or someone you trust betrays you.

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. Jesus had been teaching large numbers of people. It was near the end of the day. He was tired, and his listeners were tired. In the Bible story, Mark writes 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 give you any more water.

Words spoken before people are ready to hear them or after people have already heard enough are a waste of time. An inexperienced teacher, for example, might overwhelm you with an avalanche of facts which you cannot yet assimilate because there has been no preparation or foundation.

Patiently and moderating his pace to his audience, Jesus taught his followers, 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 you make your journey of faith, every turn on the way opens up new views and vistas, and you assimilate them, grow, and mature. To be born again is only a beginning. No one can be born again and reach instant maturity. You need to continue to grow and discover new truth.

In your day-to-day relationships with others, it's so easy 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 often spoke too soon and had too much quick advice 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's go across to the other side," meaning the opposite shore of the Sea of Galilee. It was time for a change of scenery as well as a change of pace. Almost as soon as they left the shore in their boats, he fell asleep. Not only was he tired, 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 that have been developed to aid you in your sleeping. There are sleeping pills, herbal sleep remedies, sleep music, white noise machines, earplugs and eye-shades, adjustable beds, special air mattresses, sleep clinics, and listening to sermons.

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 appears on the lake, and he remains asleep.

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 confident deity dares lie down and sleep soundly.

The disciples who were with Jesus were not at peace. Though they were seasoned fishermen and were used to sudden storms on the Sea of Galilee, they were terrified. They woke Jesus and said, “Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?” To calm them down, he said to the wind and to the sea and to them, “Peace! Be still.” Another version translates the Greek words into, “Quiet! Settle down.” As the storm subsided inside them and outside, then Jesus said to his disciples, “Why are you afraid? Have you no faith?”

Stories like this one were remembered by the early church not only because of their unusual circumstances but also because of what such stories teach. Here are some of the truths about God that this story wants you to remember as individuals.

The first truth is this: all of you face storms in your life. As indicated earlier, these storms come in many forms. They are not only storms caused by bad weather. There are the storms of illness, the death of someone you love, the loss of a job, a child getting into trouble, your house catching fire. In life’s storms, you hang on as best you can. You hope to ride out the danger and the fear. Sometimes you think it is beyond your ability to keep afloat, and you are terrified.

The storms in your life can take place when you are doing what you 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. When they left the shore, there was no sign of a storm.

Hasn’t this been your experience? Some of the worst storms in your life, some of the greatest dangers, have come to you when you were doing what you were supposed to be doing. You are faithfully doing your duty, and all of a sudden, disaster strikes. The trouble is not of your own making.

A common misconception is that if you only work hard enough and if your faith is strong enough, your life will not have any storms or problems. There are people who have an idealized picture of what life ought to be when it is normal. This picture doesn’t include any difficulties or troubles. They expect no storms. There is sunshine every day. 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 take place.

When these storms come, your little boat seems so small and vulnerable, and the sea of life so large and unpredictable. When the wind rises, the waves grow, and the boat rocks, you feel helpless and at the mercy of the forces around you. No one is immune from the storms in life.

A second truth this story wants you to remember is this: in the storms that come to you in this life, the power of God is in the boat with you. This power, even though it could be sleeping, will wake up at your call. When the limits of your human resources have been reached, when you know there is nothing more you can do, God is waiting. This is the good news of the Christian faith.

There are times when you do not realize this fact until, like the disciples, you find yourself adrift, with the wind against you and the waves high in the middle of the storm. Only then do

you come to the realization that you cannot do it on your own. You 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. There are times when it takes a very painful and graphic storm to teach you this truth, and even then, some of you have to be reminded over and over again.

A third truth carried in this story is that even though your faith is 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?" Instead of criticizing them, he said, "Peace! Be still." He was talking to them in addition to the wind and the waves. Once everything had calmed down, only then did he say to the disciples, "Why are you afraid? Where is your faith?" He said these words not in a critical tone, but in a reassuring one.

God comes to you beyond your hope when you are in need and even when your faith is small. All you need to do is ask.

There's another level in understanding this story. It was remembered not only to help individuals survive the storms in life, but also as a teaching story for how the church is to carry on its ministry in spite of the storms.

A boat has long been a symbol for the Christian church. The word "nave," which is used to describe the main worship area of a church building, comes from the Latin word "navis," for ship. That Latin word is also the root for "navy" and "navigator."

The ministry of Jesus had been generating a lot of popularity in Galilee. The crowds had become so large that he had to stand in the boat on the water's edge. According to the story, after an exhausting day of teaching, he suggested to the disciples that they go across to the other side.

You can imagine that the disciples might have been thinking to themselves: "What? Go across to the other side of this sometimes stormy lake in the dark? Why leave these shores? We've got crowds of potential followers here. On the other side of the lake, there's nothing but pagans. Those people will be difficult to deal with."

Church congregations, in the same way as individuals, like to stay with what seems safe. It's difficult to move into new territory and to try new ways. When this congregation started its radio ministry over 50 years ago, there were those who were reluctant. When we began the television ministry of outreach, it was also a risk. Later, we added the Saturday evening worship service. That was going across to the other side of the lake. Then we began the once-a-month Sunday night Taizé service, and most recently the "Plymouth Rock, Worship With Another Beat" service once a month on a Sunday evening. Both of these additions are getting a very positive response.

I continue to be very proud of this congregation for its willingness to take new risks in order to increase among people the love of God and neighbor. To be the church means to not be afraid to leave the calm seas of our harbor and head into the fullness of life, facing the rough swells of sometimes frightening risk and even failure. God has not called us to the status quo. With faith in God, we can survive the storms. The alternative to risking the storms of life as individuals and as a congregation is to stay tied up on the shore where your faith and our congregation will shrink. Amen.