Section 2 - The Storm

Matthew 14:24-33; Mark 6:45-52; John 6:16-21

“In dangers in the wilderness, dangers on the sea,” wrote Paul (II Cor. 11:26). He was describing the various hardships that he encountered as he went about doing his great work as an Apostle to the Gentiles. These perils collide in this crisis in the life of Jesus. He has just saved Himself from the dangerous enthusiasm displayed by the unthinking crowd right after the miracle of the loaves and fishes was performed in the desert. Now, just a few hours later, there is a greater disaster that is about to happen to Him. He had hurriedly sent the Twelve away in a boat so they would not encourage the people in their foolish attempts to take Him and make Him king (John 6:15). As they were on the Sea of Galilee, they were caught in the middle of a storm while He was alone on the mountain praying. The disciples were in imminent danger of being drowned. His plan for escaping one evil created a worse situation for Him. It seemed as if, through a series of unfortunate circumstances, His followers – both true and false - were about to be taken from Him. He would be left alone, just as in the last great crisis. Like a general on the day of battle, the Messianic King was watching the raging battle from the heights. He was in a tight spot and the battle was going against Him. But the Captain of salvation was sovereign over the imminent danger and would be victorious over the elements.

The Sea of Galilee is a small body of water. It is about thirteen miles long and six miles wide. Violent, sudden squalls frequently visited this sea, probably because of its location. It lies in a deep valley which was formed by a volcano. On both sides there are steep mountain ranges which rise above the water level from 1,000 to 2,000 feet. There is a considerable difference in the temperature at the top and at the bottom of these hills. Up on the plateaus above the sea, the air is cool and the winds strong. Down by the shore, which lies 700 feet below sea level, the climate is tropical. The storms which are caused by this variation in temperature are very violent. They come sweeping down the ravines onto the water. In a moment, the sea, which had been as calm as glass, becomes white with foam from one end to the other. The waves rise into the air in columns of spray.

The Twelve encountered two such storms after they became Jesus’ disciples. They probably occurred in the same year. One of them happened earlier when they visited Gadara (Matt. 8:23f.; Mk. 4:35f.; Lk. 8:22f.). The second is the one we are studying now. Both happened at night, and both were extremely violent. In the first storm, we are told that the ship was covered with waves.
and was filling so fast that it was beginning to sink. The disciples were afraid they would drown. The second storm was just as violent and lasted longer. Apparently, the Twelve were caught in it when they were about half-way across. The grayness of the dusk had turned into the darkness of night. From that time on, the wind blew with tremendous force until daybreak (the fourth watch: between 3:00 and 6:00 a.m.) without letting up at all. We have some idea of the fury of the blast from the recorded fact that, even then, they were still just a little more than half-way across the sea. In all, they had only rowed three or four miles (25 or 30 stadia, one stadia equivalent to 606¾ feet; John 6:19). The whole distance from the eastern to the western shore (measuring in a slanting direction) was probably only about six miles. During all those weary hours they were rowing with all of their might. Yet they had not done much more than hold their own against the wind and waves.

What was Jesus doing all this time? In the first storm, He had been with His disciples in the boat, sleeping after an exhausting day, “rocked in the cradle of the overbearing waves.” This time He was absent and not sleeping. Rather, He was in the mountains alone - praying. For He, also, had His own struggle on that stormy night. It was not with the howling winds but with painful thoughts. That night He rehearsed the agony of Gethsemane. With sincere prayer and focused meditation, He studied the passion sermon that He would preach the next day. He was so engrossed with His own sad thoughts that, for a time, His own disciples were almost forgotten. Finally, in the early dawn, He looked toward the sea (Mk. 6:48) and saw them rowing against the powerful wind. Without another moment’s delay, He hurried to their rescue.

**The Storm as a Symbol**

This storm on the Sea of Galilee is important as an historical fact. But it is also significant as a symbol. When we consider the time at which it occurred, it is impossible not to connect it with the awkward events of the next day. For the literal storm on the water was followed by a spiritual storm on the land. Both were equally sudden and violent. The storm on the land was as dangerous to their souls as the other one had been to their bodies. The boat containing the precious freight of Christ’s true disciples was overtaken by a sudden gust of unpopularity which came down on it like a squall on a lake in the highlands and did all but turn it over. The day before, the fickle crowd would have made Jesus their king. Now they abruptly turned away from Him in disappointment and disgust. And, as we will see, the Twelve had to make a big effort to remain faithful. They had to row hard against the wind and waves so they would not be carried quickly to their destruction by the tornado of apostasy.

There can be little doubt that the two storms - the one on the sea and the one on the shore - happening so close to one another, would become linked in the minds of the Apostles. The literal storm would be fixed in their minds as a symbol of the spiritual one and of all similar trials of faith. There were many things that happened on that fearful night - the watching, getting wet, rowing without results, fatigue, terror, and despair. These would live forever in their memory.
They would symbolically represent all of the dangers and tribulations through which believers must pass on their way to the kingdom of heaven, especially those that come upon them while they are still young in the faith. The significance of the symbol can be seen in three features: 1) the storm happened at night; 2) in the absence of Jesus; and 3) while it lasted, all progress was stopped. Storms at sea may happen at all hours of the day, but trials of faith always happen during the night. If there were no darkness, there could be no trial. If the Twelve had understood Christ's message in Capernaum, the apostasy of the multitude would not have been taken so seriously by them. But they did not understand it. Therefore, their Master was concerned lest they also forsake Him. In all such trials, it feels as if the Lord is absent. This is a constant and very painful aspect of the trial. Christ is not in the ship while the storm rages by night, and we work hard rowing without the help of His grace (so we think!), unconsolled by His spiritual presence. This was true even with the Twelve the next day on the shore. Though their Master was visible to them (physically), He had vanished from the sight of their understanding. They did not have the comfort of comprehending His meaning. Yet they clung to Him as the One who had the words of eternal life. The worst that we can encounter in these trials of faith is that in all our rowing, we make no progress. The most we can do is to hold our own, to keep off the rocky shore while we are on the sea. It is really something just to be able to do this; better still, it is everything. For it is not always true that if we are not going forward, we must be going backward. This is a saying for good weather only. When storms come, there is such a thing as standing still. To do even this much is quite an achievement. Is it really a small thing to weather the storm, to keep off the rocks, the sand, and the breakers? Do not provoke the person who is already agitated enough by the winds that beat against him. Do not share your wise sayings about progress and backsliding indiscriminately. Instead of playing the part of Job's friends, it would be better to remind him that the greatest thing he can do in his situation is to hold on, to be immovable, to keep his moral integrity and his profession of faith, and to keep off the dangerous coasts of immorality and unfaithfulness. Assure him that if he will only row a little longer - no matter how tired his arms get - God will come and calm the wind, and he will immediately reach the land.

An Important Lesson of Faith
Besides being an appropriate symbol for a trial of faith, the storm on the sea was, for the Twelve, an important lesson in faith. It helped prepare them for the future which was waiting for them. The temporary absence of their Master was preparation for His perpetual absence. Jesus' miraculous intervention when they were in a dangerous crisis was suited to impress their minds with the conviction that even after He had ascended into heaven, He would still be with them in times of danger. This plan almost backfired. But the final results were positive, and from them the disciples also learned to have confidence in the leadership of their exalted Lord, even in the middle of the most difficult situations. When the storm came, they probably concluded that Jesus had made a mistake by telling them to sail across the sea while He stayed behind to dismiss the multitude. However, the situation itself silenced this hasty judgment. Everything ended on a positive note. Their experience in this situation was designed to teach a lesson for life. This was
the lesson: Do not rashly accuse Christ of mismanagement or neglect when temporary problems arise. Have a firm faith in His wise and loving care for His cause and people. Anticipate a good outcome from all difficulties. In fact, glory in your tribulations, because of the great deliverance which will surely follow.

At the time of the storm, the disciples did not have this strong faith. They did not expect Him to come to their rescue. When He did come, they thought He was a spirit flitting over the water and cried out in the agony of superstitious terror. We note here in passing that there is an interesting relationship between the incidents of this crisis and those connected with the final one. Then, the disciples did not expect their Lord to return from the dead, just as they did not expect to see Him come to them over the sea. Therefore, His reappearance at first frightened rather than comforted them. “But they were startled and frightened and thought that they were seeing a spirit” (Luke 24:37). Good, not looked for in either case, was turned into evil. What should have been a source of intense joy to them, if they only had faith, became a new cause of alarm because of their unbelief.

The fact is, He was not expected. This seems to have imposed on Jesus the necessity of using a strategy in approaching His storm-tossed disciples. Mark relates that “…He intended to pass by them” (Mark 6:48) out of sensitivity for their weakness. He knew what He would be taken for when they first saw Him. Therefore, He wanted to attract their attention at a safe distance. He was concerned that if He appeared to them all of a sudden, He might drive them into insanity. He decided it was necessary to be as cautious in announcing His coming as people are when communicating bad news. First, He appeared as a ghost as far away as He could be seen. Then He revealed Himself through His familiar voice. He spoke the words of comfort, “It is I; do not be afraid” (Mark 6:50). Finally, He was willingly received into the boat (John 6:21).

What happened after Jesus entered the boat exposed the Twelve. There was a new manifestation of the weakness of their faith. “The wind stopped; and they were greatly astonished” (Mark 6:51). They should not have been so amazed after what had happened once before on these same waters, especially after such a great miracle was done in the wilderness on the previous day. But the storm had destroyed all their thoughts about these things. It had driven them absolutely mad, “for they had not gained any insight from the incident of the loaves, but their heart was hardened” (Mark 6:52).

Peter on the Water

The most interesting revelation of the mental state of the disciples at the time when Jesus rescued them is found in the episode about Peter which is reported by Matthew. When he understood that the “ghost” was his beloved Master, he cried, “Lord, if it is You, command me to come to You on the water” (Matt. 14:28). After he received permission, he immediately stepped out of the ship onto the sea. This was not faith, but simple rashness. Peter had an impetuous, reckless nature, and he was bouncing from one extreme of utter despair to the opposite extreme of
extravagant, reckless joy. The other disciples tamely expressed a willingness to receive Jesus into the boat after they were convinced it was He who walked on the water (John 6:21). But, in the case of Peter, his actions took the form of a romantic, adventurous wish to go out to Jesus where He was, to welcome Him back among them again. His proposal was just like the man - generous, enthusiastic, and well-meaning, but inconsiderate.

Such a proposal, of course, could not meet with Christ’s approval. However, He did not deny Peter’s request. He thought it would be good to humor the impulsive disciple to a point. He would invite him to come and then allow him to feel his own weakness while he was still in the water. So, He would teach him more about himself and, if possible, save him from the consequences of his rash, self-confident temperament. But Peter would not be made wise by one lesson, nor even by several. He would go on blundering and making mistakes until finally he fell into a grievous sin, denying his Master whom he loved so much. The denial at the final crisis could be expected from someone who behaved this way during a minor crisis. The man who said, “Command me to come to You,” was the same man who would later say, “Lord, with You I am ready to go both to prison and to death!” (Luke 22:33). This was the one who was so courageous on deck yet so fearful on the waves. He was the one, out of all the disciples, who was most likely to talk boldly when there was no danger around. But then he played the coward when the hour of trial actually arrived. The scene on the sea was only a preview or rehearsal of Peter’s fall.

That scene, however, revealed something more than the weakness of Peter’s faith. It showed also what is possible to those who believe. If the tendency of weak faith is to sink, the triumph of strong faith is to walk on the waves. This means glorying in tribulation and considering it all joy when exposed to different temptations. Those who are weak in faith and aware of how frail they are, have the privilege and responsibility of praying, “Lead us not into temptation.” But when storms come and you did not invite them, and when your boat is turned over in the middle of the sea, then Christians may trust in the promise, “When you pass through the waters, I will be with you” (Is. 43:2). If only you have faith, you will be able to walk on the rolling waves as if walking on firm land.

“He bids me come; His voice I know,  
And boldly on the waters go,  
And brave the tempest’s shock.  
O'er rude temptations now I bound;  
The billows yield a solid ground,  
The wave is firm as rock.”