

"FINDING CALM IN THE STORM"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church
106 East 86th Street
New York, New York 10028
July 27, 1997

"FINDING CALM IN THE STORM"

INTRODUCTION

I read somewhere recently that the bath tub was invented in the year 1850...13 years after our church was founded. Chances are you didn't know that. What about the telephone? Any idea as to when it was invented? It was in 1875. Someone once commented, on all of this...

"Just think....you could have sat in the bath tub for 25 years without the phone ringing..."

You know how it is. And it never seems to fail. Just when you think you will have some peace and quiet the phone rings...or the baby cries...or a water pipe bursts....or the boss calls you into her office. Peace is a precious commodity and it is and it can be...so ELUSIVE. You may have noticed...

I once read that Dante, the great poet of the Renaissance, was exiled from his home in Florence, Italy. Terribly depressed by this cruel turn of fate, he decided to walk from Florence to Paris where he could then study philosophy in an effort to find a clue to the meaning of life. One night he sought refuge at the door of a monastery. Knocking several times at the door, this weary pilgrim's knock was finally answered by a surly brother within. He came to the door, flung it open, and in a very gruff, demanding voice asked Dante, "And what do you want?" "Peace" he answered. "Peace!"

DEVELOPMENT

Peace is a beautiful word, isn't it? Yet...it's a word that is a stranger to most people now-a-days. Our fast-paced lives may provide us with many material possessions, but not always peace....that "peace that passes all human understanding." Am I overstating it when I suggest that..

Stress is our constant companion. Anxiety haunts our dreams. What if we should be "down-sized" out of a job....or what if we were ill for a prolonged period of time....or what if our next project turns out to be a failure. As I see it, the disciples of Jesus were not the only ones longing for and searching for peace in the midst of a raging storm.

H. G. Wells, a well-educated and a creative spirit, writes in his autobiography,

"I cannot adjust my life to secure any fruitful peace....here I am at 65 still seeking for Peace. A 'dignified peace'....is it just a hopeless dream?"

One wonders...is it? And where do you find peace? It's the longing of many a human heart. That experience of the disciples on Lake Galilee is an experience we will all have...eventually...out in a boat in a terrible storm and no peace in sight. You know your Bibles and I'm sure you remember the scene.

Jesus and His disciples decided to cross the Sea of Galilee by boat. And suddenly a terrible storm comes up....that can happen on a body of water and it is a frightening experience. The winds began to howl and the waves beat against their little boat to the point where water began to come in. Panic hits the disciples. Meanwhile Jesus is fast asleep in the stern of that boat. Either He was an unusually sound sleeper, or, even more likely, He was "at peace" with the world.

I wonder how many of you have tossed and turned in your bed at night - not because of a storm on the outside, but because of a storm on the inside. Be honest and raise a hand if you have. The disciples woke Jesus and in their disturbed state of mind, they asked Him,

"Lord...do you not care that we perish?" And then Mark tells us that Jesus simply "rebuked the wind" and said to the sea, "Peace....BE STILL!". And then that beautiful line...."And the wind ceased, and there was a great calm."

Then Jesus turned in their direction and said,

"Why are you afraid? Have you no faith?" And Mark tells then tells us that the disciples were filled with awe and said to one another, "Who is this, that even the wind and the sea obey Him?"

FURY OF THE STORM

There are three elements of this word picture that Mark has painted for us that we would do well to ponder...and reflect upon. And the first is the fury of the storm.

Storms are a part of life. Some days are pleasant and non-challenging, but as we have noted, the weather can change quite rapidly. A phone call. A letter. Soon the thunder is crashing all around us and our tiny craft is being tossed on the waves of life's vicissitudes. Storm, of course, is a relative term. Each of us gives our own definition to the nature of a storm. Here's one I came across in my reading....I think it was in Guideposts.

Mary Ellen Clark's storm was a strange physical problem that threatened her life's goal. If you're a fan of the Olympics - and some of you are - her name may be familiar to you. She is one of our Swimming Team's best divers. She began diving as a kid and with her natural talent and some hard work and some teenage determination, she moved up in the ranks of our country's best competitive divers. And that makes it almost unbelievable to think that she suffers from a dizzying condition called vertigo.

It was in 1988 in Australia where she first experience an attack of vertigo in a college meet. Apparently after plunging into the water, she suddenly lost all sense of balance and direction. She couldn't figure out which way was up and at the time, she had no idea of what was wrong and later she would write,

"If you asked a screenwriter to concoct the worst condition to afflict a competitive diver, a really imaginative scenarist might come up with vertigo....."

But because her vertigo episodes were so rare, Mary Ellen didn't push to visit a doctor to find out if anything was wrong. Over the next few years, she moved up in the ranks of divers, eventually winning a bronze at the 1992 summer Olympics. But while training for the 1996 Olympics, she had another frightening episode of disorientation. It was then that the doctors diagnosed her with vertigo. She came to the realization that her days as a diver might be over. She tried every medical treatment, but nothing seemed to work. One night, in great despair, she called her friend, Steve Duvall, and poured out her sadness to him. He asked her,

"Mary Ellen...what is the worst possible scenario that you can imagine?" She answered....."That's I'll never dive again". He asked her, "And can you accept that?"

Well, Mary Ellen didn't know just how to answer that. After hanging up, she began thinking about some Bible verses she had first learned as a teenager, something from the 4th chapter of Philippians where St. Paul writes,

"I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation....whether well-fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through Him who gives me strength....."

(Philippians 4: 12, 13)

This is an inspiring and comforting verse for many...perhaps it is one of yours, too. But it sparked Mary Ellen to ask another different question: could she not do something through Him who gave her strength? Could God give her the strength to not dive again and still be "content"? The wonderful thing here is that Mary Ellen gives credit to her parents for pointing her to the answer. They had taught her long ago that her faith in God was more important than anything else in life. She knew that she could trust God no matter whether she ever dived again.

As you Olympic lovers know, Mary Ellen did overcome her vertigo and she did go on to win a bronze medal in the 1996 Summer Olympics in Atlanta and she will go down in history as the oldest diver yet to win in her event.

For her, the storm was vertigo. For you and I it may be something quite different. It might be the failure of a marriage. It may be a serious health concern...or concern over a teenager in the family...or the loss of a child or parent or a loved one. The only certainty in life is that sooner or later we will confront our storm. That is the first element of the picture - call it, if you will, the fury of the storm.

THE FEAR OF THE DISCIPLES

And the second is the fear of the disciples. These men were not experienced sailors. They were fishermen who had fished these waters many times and yes had experienced choppy waters out there before...but this storm was different and they were afraid...frightened...scared....

I wonder....is there anyone here this morning in this room who has never been afraid? Wasn't it Rembrandt who once painted a canvass titled, "Storm On the Sea of Galilee". If you examine that painting carefully you'll notice that there are 14 men in that boat. There are the twelve disciples plus Jesus. And that makes 13. Who is the 14th passenger? It's Rembrandt himself! We all know what it is to be afraid. We all know what it is to be on the verge of panic.

Mickey Brown knew that feeling. Mickey was raised in the church, but confesses that his faith was weak....as a young adult. In his early twenties, it was off to Vietnam as a medic. Mickey Brown tells us that there....

"Life seemed so fragile and ephemeral and looking for something to hold on to I began attending the chapel services."

There was that night when word came that an enemy attack was about to happen and Mickey was sent to defend the Chapel. He was quick to realize that he would not have enough ammunition to fight off an entire battalion all by himself. He remembers quite well what his thoughts were in those frightening moments.

"The only thing I could do in such a hopeless situation was to pray". He also remembers how in that tense situation he recalled a line from Psalm 91....."A thousand shall fall at my side and ten thousand at thy right hand, but it shall not come nigh thee". With that, he recalls how "calmness washed over me like warm sunlight coming through a window...."

Still frightened and still dreading the battle, he could now, however, see his way through it. He said that the attack never came, that the village was quiet throughout the night. He also says this,

"Now....25 years later....I still carry that little pocket Bible I had in Vietnam. When danger is close I re-read that one passage outlined in faded red pencil from Psalm 91....and yes, it helps."

One of my favorites is that line,

"Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on Thee."

How many times I've pulled that one to the forefront of my own thinking and yes, it helps. Each of us must face our own storms as we go along through life. One of the greatest adversaries we face is apt to be our own fear. The fury of the storm. And then, the fear of the disciples...but there is a third element in this scene that we need to consider.

A FAITH THAT SAVES

It is the faith that saves. I love that line and "Jesus rebuked the wind and said to the sea.....'peace.....be still!'" "And the wind ceased and there was a great calm, and then He asked His disciples,

"Why are you afraid? And have you no faith?"

And that's a question you and I might very well ask ourselves when the winds are howling and the waves are beating on our little boat. "Why am I afraid? Have I no faith?"

Townley Lord is a former president of the Baptist World Alliance. Speaking to the Alliance on one occasion, Lord told of an experience he had in World War II. He said he had been a warden during the war with the responsibility of seeing to it that a nearby bomb shelter was open when it was needed. He spoke of how there was a piano down there in that bomb shelter and they had a good pianist to play it.

One night when they were down in that bomb shelter, Lord noticed two young American soldiers and their dates crowded in...seeking shelter from the bombs that were being dropped on London. Holding up his hand for silence, Townley Lord invited the four young people to come up to the piano and sing a song.

After a bit of hesitation, they came to the piano, pushed to one side the popular song the group had been singing, opened up a hymn book and began to sing that old favorite of many, "Standing on the Promises of God". Dr. Lord said that after the quartet had sung, he felt moved to lead the group in prayer. He told the Alliance,

"I have never been in a church service where the presence of the Holy Spirit was more evident."

There it was...in the midst of war...bombs falling all around them....four young people sang about this peace of God "that passes all human understanding". You and I have sung many hymns and songs across the years of our lives with the same message. Sometimes it is hard, it is difficult to hold on when your whole world is shaking. Still, this is the word, the message we need to hear.

There is ONE who quiets the winds. There is ONE who stills the waves. There is ONE who speaks to our hearts and if we are listening, He will calm our fearful spirits as well.

SO...there it is: first, the fury of the storm. Second, the fear of the disciples. Third, there is also the faith that saves.

CLOSING Linda Sledge recalls a day from her childhood that she will never forget....playing in the sand at the beach....building sand castles with her little red shovel and pail. She had wandered away from her parents and suddenly a great wave knocked her off of her feet into the ocean. She somehow managed to get up on her feet....but the sand was flowing out from under her little feet. Then another wave struck and knocked her over....again, she had lost her footing. She cried out....for help...for her parents and all she could see was the vast ocean ahead. She thought she was doomed, but just then two strong arms reached out from behind her and pulled her to safety.

"Don't be afraid" said her father....."I've been watching you all the time.....there's nothing to be frightened of".

I'd like to think that those are the words of Christ to us. He is not sleeping. He is watching over us. Why are we afraid? Have we no faith?

PRAYER Make us sensitive to Your nearness, to Your presence in these moments, O God. Let this Biblical scene speak to each of us...and let it strengthen our faith. Wrestle with us in those corners of our lives where fear sometimes creeps in....and stress and anxiety take over....and rob us of the joy of living. In the spirit of Jesus, we pray. Amen.

"FINDING CALM IN THE STORM"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church
106 East 86th Street
New York, New York 10028
July 27, 1997

"FINDING CALM IN THE STORM"

INTRODUCTION

I read somewhere recently that the bath tub was invented in the year 1850...13 years after our church was founded. Chances are you didn't know that. What about the telephone? Any idea as to when it was invented. It was in 1875. Some has observed that,

"Just think...you could have sat in the bath tub for 25 years without the phone ringing..."

You know how it is. And it never seems to fail. Just when you think you will have some peace and quiet the phone rings...or the baby cries...or a water pipe bursts....or the boss calls you into her office. Peace is a precious commodity and it is and it can be...so ELUSIVE. You may have noticed...

I once read that Dante, the great poet of the Renaissance, was exiled from his home in Florence, Italy. Terribly depressed by this cruel turn of fate, he decided to walk from Florence to Paris where he could then study philosophy in an effort to find a clue to the meaning of life. One night he sought refuge at the door of a monastery. Knocking several times at the door, this weary pilgrim's knock was finally answered by a surly brother within. He came to the door, flung it open, and in a very gruff, demanding voice asked Dante, "And what do you want?" "Peace" he answered. "Peace!"

DEVELOPMENT

Peace is a beautiful word, isn't it? Yet...it's a word that is a stranger to most people now-a-days. Our fast-paced lives may provide us with many material possessions, but not always peace....that "peace that passes all human understanding."

Stress is our constant companion. Anxiety haunts our dreams. What if we should be "down-sized" out of a job....or what if we were ill for a prolonged period of time....or what if our next project turns out to be a failure. As I see it, the disciples of Jesus were not the only ones longing for and searching for peace in the midst of a raging storm.

H. G. Wells, a well-educated and a creative spirit, writes in his autobiography,

"I cannot adjust my life to secure any fruitful peace....here I am at 65 still seeking for Peace. A 'dignified peace'....is it just a hopeless dream?"

One wonders...is it? And where do you find peace? It's the longing of many a human heart. That experience of the disciples on Lake Galilee is an experience we will all have...eventually...out in a boat in a terrible storm and no peace in sight. You know your Bibles and I'm sure you remember the scene.

Jesus and His disciples decided to cross the Sea of Galilee by boat. And suddenly a terrible storm comes up....that can happen on a body of water and it is a frightening experience. The winds began to howl and the waves beat against their little boat to the point where water began to come in. Panic hits the disciples. Meanwhile Jesus is fast asleep in the stern of that boat. Either He was an unusually sound sleeper, or, even more likely, He was "at peace" with the world.

I wonder how many of you have tossed and turned in your bed at night - not because of a storm on the outside, but because of a storm on the inside. Be honest and raise a hand if you have. The disciples work Jesus and in their disturbed state of mind, they asked Him,

"Lord...do you not care that we perish?" And then Mark tells us that Jesus simply "rebuked the wind" and said to the sea, "Peace....BE STILL!". And then that beautiful line...."And the wind ceased, and there was a great calm."

Then Jesus turned in their direction and said,

"Why are you afraid? Have you no faith?" And Mark tells then tells us that the disciples were filled with awe and said to one another, "Who is this, that even the wind and the sea obey Him?"

FURY OF THE STORM

There are three elements of this word picture that Mark has painted for us that we would do well to ponder...and reflect upon. And the first is the fury of the storm.

Storms are a part of life. Some days are pleasant and non-challenging, but as we have noted, the weather can change quite rapidly. A phone call. A letter. Soon the thunder is crashing all around us and our tiny craft is being tossed on the waves of life's vicissitudes. Storm, of course, is a relative term. Each of us gives our own definition to the nature of a storm. Here's one I came across in my reading....I think it was in Guideposts.

Mary Ellen Clark's storm was a strange physical problem that threatened her life's goal. If you're a fan of the Olympics - and some of you are - her name may be familiar to you. She is one of our Swimming Team's best divers. She began diving as a kid and with her natural talent and some hard work and some teenage determination, she moved up in the ranks of our country's best competitive divers. And that makes it almost unbelievable to think that she suffers from a dizzying condition called vertigo.

It was in 1988 in Australia where she first experience an attack of vertigo in a college meet. Apparently after plunging into the water, she suddenly lost all sense of balance and direction. She couldn't figure out which way was up and at the time, she had no idea of what was wrong and later she would write,

"If you asked a screenwriter to concoct the worst condition to afflict a competitive diver, a really imaginative scenarist might come up with vertigo....."

But because her vertigo episodes were so rare, Mary Ellen didn't push to visit a doctor to find out if anything was wrong. Over the next few years, she moved up in the ranks of divers, eventually winning a bronze at the 1992 summer Olympics. But while training for the 1996 Olympics, she had another frightening episode of disorientation. It was then that the doctors diagnosed her with vertigo. She came to the realization that her days as a diver might be over. She tried every medical treatment, but nothing seemed to work. One night, in great despair, she called her friend, Steve Duvall, and poured out her sadness to him. He asked

"Mary Ellen...what is the worst possible scenario that you can imagine?" She answered....."That's I'll never dive again". He asked her, "And can you accept that?"

Well, Mary Ellen didn't know just how to answer that. After hanging up, she began thinking about some Bible verses she had first learned as a teenager, something from the 4th chapter of Philippians where St. Paul writes,

"I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation....whether well-fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through Him who gives me strength....."

(Philippians 4: 12, 13)

This is an inspiring and comforting verse for many...perhaps it is one of yours, too. But it sparked Mary Ellen to ask another different question: could she not do something through Him who gave her strength? Could God give her the strength to not dive again and still be "content"? The wonderful thing here is that Mary Ellen gives credit to her parents for pointing her to the answer. They had taught her long ago that her faith in God was more important than anything else in life. She knew that she could trust God no matter whether she ever dived again.

As you Olympic lovers know, Mary Ellen did overcome her vertigo and she did go on to win a bronze medal in the 1996 Summer Olympics in Atlanta and she will go down in history as the oldest diver yet to win in her event.

For her, the storm was vertigo. For you and I it may be something quite different. It might be the failure of a marriage. It may be a serious health concern...or concern over a teenager in the family....or the loss of a child or parent or a loved one. The only certainty in life is that sooner or later we will confront our storm. That is the first element of the picture - call it, if you will, the fury of the storm.

THE FEAR OF THE DISCIPLES

And the second is the fear of the disciples. These men were not experienced sailors. They were fishermen who had fished these waters many times and yes had experienced choppy waters out there before...but this storm was different and they were afraid...frightened...scared.

I wonder....is there anyone here this morning in this room who has never been afraid? Wasn't it Rembrandt who once painted a canvass titled, "Storm On the Sea of Galilee". If you examine that painting carefully you'll notice that there are 14 men in that boat. There are the twelve disciples plus Jesus. And that makes 13. Who is the 14th passenger? It's Rembrandt himself! We all know what it is to be afraid. We all know what it is to be on the verge of panic.

Mickey Brown knew that feeling. Mickey was raised in the church, but confesses that his faith was weak.....as a young adult. In his early twenties, it was off to Vietnam as a medic. Mickey Brown tells us that there....

"Life seemed so fragile and ephemeral and looking for something to hold on to I began attending the chapel services."

There was that night when word came that an enemy attack was about to happen and Mickey was sent to defend the Chapel. He was quick to realize that he would not have enough ammunition to fight off an entire battalion all by himself. He remember what his thoughts were...

"The only thing I could do in such a hopeless situation was to pray". He also remembers how in that tense situation he recalled a line from Psalm 91....."A thousand shall fall at my side and ten thousand at thy right hand, but it shall not come nigh thee". With that, he recalls how "calmness washed over me like warm sunlight coming through a window...."

Still frightened and still dreading the battle, he could now, however, see his way through it. He said that the attack never came, that the village was quiet throughout the night. He also says this,

"Now....25 years later....I still carry that little pocket Bible I had in Vietnam. When danger is close I re-read that one passage outlined in faded red pencil from Psalm 91....and yes, it helps."

One of my favorites is that line,

"Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on Thee."

How many times I've pulled that one to the forefront of my own thinking and yes, it helps. Each of us must face our own storms as we go along through life. One of the greatest adversaries we face is apt to be our own fear. The fury of the storm. And then, the fear of the disciples...but there is a third element in this scene that we need to consider.

A FAITH THAT SAVES

It is the faith that saves. I love that line and "Jesus rebuked the wind and said to the sea.....'peace.....be still!'" "And the wind ceased and there was a great calm, and then He asked His disciples,

"Why are you afraid? And have you no faith?"

And that's a question you and I might very well ask ourselves when the winds are howling and the waves are beating on our little boat. "Why am I afraid? Have I no faith?"

Townley Lord is a former president of the Baptist World Alliance. Speaking to the Alliance on one occasion, Lord told of an experience he had in World War II. He said he had been a warden during the war with the responsibility of seeing to it that a nearby bomb shelter was open when it was needed. He spoke of how there was a piano down there in that bomb shelter and they had a good pianist to play it.

One night when they were down in that bomb shelter, Lord noticed two young American soldiers and their dates crowded in...seeking shelter from the bombs that were being dropped on London. Holding up his hand for silence, Townley Lord invited the four young people to come up to the piano and sing a song.

After a bit of hesitation, they came to the piano, pushed to one side the popular song the group had been singing, opened up a hymn book and began to sing that old favorite of many, "Standing on the Promises of God". Dr. Lord said that after the quartet had sung, he felt moved to lead the group in prayer. He told the Alliance,

"I have never been in a church service where the presence of the Holy Spirit was more evident."

There it was...in the midst of war...bombs falling all around them....four young people sang about this peace of God "that passes all human understanding". You and I have sung many hymns and songs across the years of our lives with the same message. Sometimes it is hard, it is difficult to hold on when your whole world is shaking. Still, this is the word, the message we need to hear.

There is ONE who quiets the winds. There is ONE who stills the waves. There is ONE who speaks to our hearts and if we are listening, He will calm our fearful spirits as well.

SO...there it is: first, the fury of the storm. Second, the fear of the disciples. Third, there is also the faith that saves.

CLOSING Linda Sledge recalls a day from her childhood that she will never forget.....playing in the sand at the beach....building sand castles with her little red shovel and pail. She had wandered away from her parents and suddenly a great wave knocked her off of her feet into the ocean. She somehow managed to get up on her feet....but the sand was flowing out from under her little feet. Then another wave struck and knocked her over....again, she had lost her footing. She cried out....for help...for her parents and all she could see was the vast ocean ahead. She thought she was doomed, but just then two strong arms reached out from behind her and pulled her to safety.

"Don't be afraid" said her father....."I've been watching you all the time.....there's nothing to be frightened of".

I'd like to think that those are the words of Christ to us. He is not sleeping. He is watching over us. Why are we afraid? Have we no faith?

PRAYER Make us sensitive to Your nearness, to Your presence in these moments, O God. Let this Biblical scene speak to each of us...and let it strengthen our faith. Wrestle with us in those corners of our lives where fear sometimes creeps in....and stress and anxiety take over....and rob us of the joy of living. In the spirit of Jesus, we pray. Amen.