

OUR REFUGE IN THE STORM

INTRODUCTION

The sermon this morning begins with this observation concerning ourselves as human beings - we are constantly getting into trouble. All kinds of trouble - major and minor troubles, physical and moral troubles, personal and public troubles; financial troubles - we borrow money and we're not able to pay it back; domestic troubles - there is friction in that very place where above all others there should be peace; nervous and emotional troubles - disturbances in the very core of our being, disturbances that are the most difficult of all to reach. And then, of course, there are the troubles we have with our bodies which are constantly getting out of tune, out of order, sometimes ceasing to function altogether.

There are times, of course, when we have no one to blame but ourselves for the trouble that we get into. For instance, a person drinks too much, drives too fast, crashes into a tree. He brings the trouble on himself and he has no one to blame but himself. On the other hand, a great many of our troubles come through no fault of our own. For instance, a person lives in a city - Brooklyn, for example - and one of these giant jet airliners crashes to the ground. An entire city block of homes is destroyed in the resulting fire. Your home happens to be among those wiped out. It is no fault of yours. You are not to blame for it.

Whatever the nature of the trouble may be, or whatever the cause of it may be, the fact of the trouble remains. Job, speaking centuries ago, put it into a single sentence which by its very brevity and bluntness is powerful: "Man that is born of a woman is full of trouble". Indeed it is so; many of you know it all too well.

WE KNOW THIS ABOUT OURSELVES TOO

We know this about ourselves too. We know that when we encounter trouble, we seek help. To be sure, some people are quite reluctant to do this, to cry for help. There are those who have been brought up to believe that they should rely on themselves alone, that they should not be dependent upon anyone. I know I have discovered in my ministry that there are some people who are extremely reluctant to let anybody know that they need help, that they are faced with something that they just cannot handle by themselves. They are too proud to ask for help. But when the trouble reaches the point where it is beyond all the resources of a man, then proud or not, self-reliant or not, he reaches out a hand and asks for help.

If the air had a voice and could speak, think of the cries for help with which it would be filled - women crying for help to save their children, men crying for help as they go down on sinking ships, or as they are trapped in burning planes, or as they find themselves caught in a net of lies, or laid low by a fatal disease, or lost in the labyrinthine ways of life.

When we get into trouble, we seek help and in our seeking we eventually turn to God. And when we call upon God for help, we receive help, help, that is, of one kind or another. There are times when that help comes directly and immediately as though God were answering at the very moment that our plea for help is expressed. I know I've

sensed something like this happening on one or two occasions in my own life - a direct answer to a prayer. Perhaps you've had this experience too; many people have had it happen. It happened, for instance, in the life of Jane Jones. You may never have heard of Jane Jones before, therefore, let me introduce her to you. Back in the 1880's, Jane Jones and her two sisters left Wales to come to America to seek their destiny. They were poor, but somehow they managed to get together enough money to buy passage to the United States on a small ship. They travelled steerage. During the crossing, there was a terrible storm. Their little ship pitched, and rocked and rolled, and there was serious doubt as to whether it was going to be able to ride out the storm. These three young women were so frightened that they got down on their knees to pray. They prayed to God and asked him to save them to the shores of America. And in that prayer, they all vowed that if they reached America, all of the money that they might make in this land would be given to God and the Church. Their prayers were answered. We're told that the circumstances changed - that almost immediately the troubled waters began to grow calm and that their own fears began to subside. To make a long story short Jane Jones and her sisters reached the shores of America. They asked for help. They got the help they asked for - directly and immediately. It does happen. We ought never to rule out the possibility of things like this happening in our lives!

And then there are times when the help we ask for doesn't come as directly and quickly, but rather it comes indirectly, in the way that things happen, indirectly perhaps through a person. Let me continue on with this story of Jane Jones for there is more to it than what I have already told you. Shortly after arriving in this country Jane Jones and her two sisters joined a church. They joined this church, the old Park Avenue Methodist Church that use to stand on the corner of 86th Street and Park Avenue. We're told that she was a faithful member and exercised all of the vows of membership faithfully and loyally. Her two sisters found work as domestics as did Jane Jones. Her two sisters preceeded her in death and upon their death Jane received all of the money that they had made. She never fogot the vow that she had made on that little ship years and years before. She had made a promise to God and she intended to keep that promise. When she was an old woman she called in her lawyer and also the chairman of the Board of Trustees of the Church and told them that she wanted to make a gift to the church in order to fulfill the vow that had been made many years before. It's strange the way that things work out. Apparently at the time that all of this happened, this church was in real danger, real financial stress. It was at one of the low points in its 124 years of history. The prayers of the people Sunday after Sunday were that God would somehow lead them through the dark situation in which they were in, that somehow they might find a way to keep the doors of the church open. Their prayers were answered. The answer came in a generous gift of over \$20,000 that Jane Jones gave to the church. The point is that God answers our pleas for help in strange and mysterious ways, and sometimes that help comes through the channel of another human being as it did in the case of this church and the way that Jane Jones helped to keep its doors open. And who knows, perhaps fifty years from now, they may be talking about some of you and the things you have done to keep the doors of this church open.

THE HELP WE GET IS NOT ALWAYS THE HELP THAT WE ASK FOR

asked for. Think of it in this fashion. A child is stricken with a serious handicap and it appears as though his entire life will be ruined by this unfair limitation. His parents know that they cannot do anything about it, nor can any of the doctors do anything to help. They turn to God and ask for help. They ask that the handicap be removed. Time goes by and the handicap is not removed, but the child learns almost miraculously to handle his handicap and to handle it in such a way that it transfigures his life and gives it a nobility and significance which otherwise it might never have had. The help was given, but in this case it was not the help that the parents had been praying for. This happens over and over again. We ask to be spared from something we cannot cope with. We are not spared, but we are given the strength to handle it and to live with it.

Moving on then, there are times too when the help that God gives to us is not always the help that we

These are things that we know about life, things drawn from the area of our own personal experience. We get into trouble invariably, sooner or later, some more than others. When we do, we ask for help. We turn to God and seek his help, and when we do we receive his help.

FOUR THINGS TO REMEMBER

Now these facts help to bring certain things into plain view. Let me try to focus them for you, if I can, in the time that remains, to make them as sharp as I can so you can take them out of here with you. Four things to remember, and I put them before you as quickly and as briefly as possible.

The first thing all of this makes plain to us is that there will probably never be a time when you are completely free from trouble. There may be times when your troubles are at a minimum, but I doubt whether there will be a time when you can say, I am completely immune to the trouble of the world. No matter how well to do you are, your material wealth will never make you secure against trouble. No matter how good you are, you will never be spared because you are good. I think we would do well to settle with this right in the beginning. To look at life with the assumption that storms are a part of living is to look at life realistically.

The second thing to remember centers around this that there may come a time in your life when you are faced with trouble that you cannot handle entirely by yourself. And when that time comes, don't hesitate to ask for help. Don't be too proud. Don't stand on your dignity. To be sure, you want to do everything you can do to help yourself, but if after you have done all you can do to help yourself, then don't hesitate to ask for help. And let me add this. Don't hesitate to ask God for help. In so doing, you will be in good company. Remember it was the Apostle Paul who turned to God for help when he had a physical affliction that he felt was thwarting his work in preaching the Gospel. And you will be in the company of Jesus himself, who when he was in the Garden of Gethsemane asked God to spare him the death that he saw waiting for him. He was not spared, but he was given the strength to go through it in such a way that it has never failed to touch the hearts of men everywhere since that time!

ASK FOR

A third thing is brought into view by all of this. Let me put it to you in this way: the chances are you won't get the help you need and ask for unless you admit it. We know this from our own personal experience. You see a close friend who appears to be in some sort of difficulty and you may want to reach out and be of some help, but unless your friend asks for help and unless he really wants your help, the chances are you won't be able to do very much for him. You may stand ready with everything you possess, ready to reach out, and yet you may not be able to reach him because he hasn't asked you for help. God cannot really help us until we reach the point where we are willing to admit that we are in need of help and have the humility to ask for it.

And fourth and just as important, I think if you ask God for help and get help then that experience will be to you one of the greatest assurances that you may ever have of the reality of God. There will be times in your life when God is not real to you, when he seems to be far away. You may search the natural world to find some intimation of His presence and perhaps all you will meet will be the blind and heartless face of the sky. You may search through all of the proofs for God's existence that the mind of man has suggested, and they will seem hollow and as empty as a shell. You may come to Church with all of the sincerity in the world, looking for God and not finding him, opening the Bible and feeling nothing. And then you will remember: when I was in trouble, I called upon the Lord and he heard me. And your life will be undergirded with the rock-like faith of the psalmist who long ago declared: GOD IS OUR REFUGE AND OUR STRENGTH. HE IS A VERY PRESENT HELP IN TROUBLE!

LET US PRAY:

There are times, Our Father, when we find ourselves surrounded by bewildering and perplexing situations. There are times when we simply do not know which way to turn. In the quietness of these moments which come at the end of this service, we would call quietly upon thee for help, for guidance, for wisdom and greater strength. Help us to solve the problems confronting us. Bid our restless and anxious spirits to find their perfect rest in Thee. Amen