

"WHEN ALL ELSE FAILS: TAKE A NAP"

A Sermon By

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### INTRODUCTION

We've just sung, "Jesus, Lover of My Soul", the famous hymn written by Charles Wesley. It's included in most lists of favorite hymns, even though one critic referred to it as "rhythmic dullness". You may agree with that opinion. But it persists, in spite of that opinion, as one of the favorite hymns among Christians. It was written by Charles Wesley in 1738 shortly after his brother John's famous Aldersgate experience, that evening when he attended the service of the Moravians on Aldersgate Street in London and heard the minister read Luther's preface to Paul's Letter to the Romans, talking about God's grace and how it is effective in our lives. As the result of hearing those words spoken, John Wesley felt his own heart "strangely warmed."

Wesley went to Aldersgate because he had seen the Moravians on board ship to America and had been impressed with their calm in the midst of a storm. Both John and Charles Wesley had sailed from England a few years before to go to the Georgia colony to serve as Chaplains to the colonists and missionaries to the Indians. It was a disaster for both brothers, but particularly for John. He really made a mess of things and was fired by General Oglethorpe and sent back to England.

### DEVELOPMENT

But on the trip over to Georgia he sailed with Moravians. The Ocean voyage was at the wrong time of year. The trip took four months, from November to February, the worst time to cross the Atlantic. In the midst of that voyage a terrible storm came up and everyone panicked. Everyone, that is, but the Moravians. They gathered together in the hold of the ship and sang hymns together, apparently unafraid. They were calm in the midst of that storm. That impressed Wesley that there was something missing in his own religious life. And so he sought out the Moravians, both in Georgia and when he got back to England in 1738. And on that night in May of 1738 he attended the service at Aldersgate, in London, and received the assurance, as he put it, that God forgave his sins, "even mine", and learned from that assurance of the love of God that casts out fear.

It was shortly after that Aldersgate experience that Charles Wesley wrote "Jesus, Lover of My Soul". Hear the words again.

"While the nearer waters roll,  
While the tempest still is high:  
Hide me, O my Saviour, hide,  
Till the storm of life is past;  
Safe into the haven guide;  
O receive my soul at last!"

And I cannot prove this, but I'd like to think that those lines recalled the experience on the Atlantic when both Wesleys, Charles and John, discovered that faith means the ability to face danger, and death, with equanimity. That's the right word. It's a beautiful word. Equanimity. The ability to be calm when there is every reason to be in panic.

### EQUANIMITY

I remember going into an office and seeing a sign that read, "If you can keep calm when everyone else is in panic, then you don't have the facts...you don't understand the situation. And I think that's right sometimes. But there have always been those who do understand the situation in their own life and the situation in this world perfectly well.

I think of the great heroes of the Christian faith who have gone against the stream of their time, the most recent example being Bishop Tutu, who speaks with the same kind of assurance and calm, and even with humor, aware of the danger he faces daily. That has always been the test of Christian faith, to sail through the storms with equanimity, calmness of spirit. Like Paul when he wrote, "Whether I live or whether I die, it is of no matter to me, for I belong to Christ." Equanimity.

#### EVIDENCE OF FAITH

And our text for this morning is calling for that, the Scripture passage read earlier by William Bell. It lifts up equanimity as the evidence of faith. It asks, have you the quality of faith to trust that God is with you through the storms of your life? Or do you panic and fear that you are all alone, and that whatever it is that you are facing now in your life is going to overwhelm you and swamp you and drown you?

This story is addressed to those of us in the Church who profess faith. We are to see ourselves in the same boat with the disciples. In the Gardiner Museum in Boston there is a painting by Rembrandt entitled, "The Storm on the Sea of Galilee". It's Rembrandt's interpretation of this scene. It's a marvelous painting. It shows the disciples in panic as their small vessel is lifted high by a huge wave, ready to be crashed down. Two of the disciples are waking up Jesus, who is taking a nap in the stern of the boat, his head resting on a pillow.

That's Rembrandt's portrayal of this scene from the Gospel of Mark. But there is something strange about the scene. You count the figures in the painting; there are fourteen of them there. There should be thirteen; twelve disciples and Jesus. But there are fourteen. What happened? Who's the extra person. And then you notice that one of the men in the boat is Rembrandt himself. He has painted himself into the picture. Rembrandt put himself in the same boat with the disciples, and that's a marvelous interpretation of this passage. That's the way we're supposed to interpret it, put ourselves in the boat with the disciples.

#### AND ANOTHER REASON FOR DOING THAT

Here's another reason for doing that. From the beginning the Church has used the ship as a symbol of the Church. The ecumenical movement in our day does that, has its symbol as a ship on the sea. And the Roman Catholic Church has already referred to itself as "the bark of Peter", the ship of Peter. And that part of the sanctuary in which the people sit is called the "nave", and "nave" is Latin for "Ship". So when the worshippers gather in the Church they gather in the nave to remind themselves that they are in the same boat with the disciples. And Jesus is our captain, He is in charge, and He will guide us safely to the other shore. We are to trust Him.

But, He's asleep, the story says. But His sleep in the midst of the storm is not evidence of His uncaring or His distance from our plight, but is evidence of His equanimity. The tumult of the storm is of no concern to Him. He is so little concerned that He sleeps while it rages. It's a wonderful illustration of defiance of that which would threaten to destroy us, that He could be so calm that He sleeps in the midst of the storm that rages about us. But not us. We cry out to Him, "Master! This event is going to drown me! Save me!" And He awakens and rebukes the storm, and then turns to you and me and says, "Why are you afraid? Have you no faith?"

That word is for those who sit in the nave, in the ship, who are there in the same boat with the disciples, and who face a storm in their life and fear that it is going to swamp them. It is for those who say, "Maybe Jesus did those things

for other people, but can He do it for me?" That's why Jesus answers, "Where is your faith?"

This story is telling us first of all that there is a difference between believing in Jesus and having faith in Him. Belief is what you have in fair weather; faith is what you need when the storms come. And there is a difference. Belief is something that you recite in a creed; faith is staking your life on what you believe. That's the hard part. That's what faith is. So when Jesus asks the disciples, "Where is your faith?" He's not asking them, "What do you believe?" He is asking them, "Why do you not trust ~~what~~ you believe? You believe who I am. Why don't you trust it?"

Faith begins when the storms come. Until then you may have some nice maps and charts that you can buy at a store, frame them, hang them on the wall. That's what beliefs are - decorations. Until the storm comes, and then it's a different matter. It's a different thing to climb into a boat, sail out, as Kierkegaard used to put it, "over 70,000 fathoms" and trust that the charts are going to guide you safely to your destination. That's what faith is for. You see, it's courage...courage that has said ~~its~~ prayers.

#### BELIEFS AND FAITH

I confess to you, I'm sure about my beliefs. I can articulate my beliefs. I am a professional in beliefs. I can arrange them systematically. I can shape them so as to please different people. I'm an expert in believing. But I'm a little unsure about my faith because, you see, I've never really been in a bad storm. Oh, in a squall now and then, didn't last very long. I probably could have gotten out of it by myself. But I've never been in a situation where I wasn't in control, or at least thought I was in control. I've never been in a situation where I had to trust, I mean really trust, that Jesus is my Lord. Not just believe that, not just recite it, but trust it. That's what faith really means - trusting what you believe. Faith begins when the storm is more than you can handle, and yet you keep sailing on, right into the face of it, trusting that Jesus is in control even if you are not, trusting that even though it's not going to be the way you wanted it to be, it is still going to be good.

As a pastor - like all other pastors - I see people in times of adversity. I encourage them, advise them, support them on their journey through the storms that are hitting their lives. But when they leave the study, or I leave the hospital room, or the cemetery, I ask myself: could I do it myself? Could I do what I have encouraged them to do? I don't know. But I do know this. That I used to look with condescension upon those ~~verses~~ such as "Jesus, Lover of My Soul", and "Jesus, Savior Pilot Me". I thought they were trite and sentimental and somewhat escapist - rhythmic dullness. But I have seen enough of life now to know that my dislike for them was not the result of my sophistication, but the lack of it. I know now that it is only when you've gone through the storms of life that you can understand:

"Jesus, Savior, pilot me Over ~~life's~~ tempestuous sea;  
Unknown waves before me roll, rising rock and treacherous  
shoal;  
Chart and compass come from Thee. Jesus, Savior, pilot me."

Lead me. Because I don't know the way. You and I may have beliefs, but I tell you, we don't know if we really have faith until the storms come.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a German Lutheran pastor, arrested by the Gestapo and put in prison, later executed for his part in the conspiracy against Hitler. While in prison he wrote letters and notes to his family and his friends, especially to Eberhard Bethge, his closest friend. His sisters and sympathetic guards smuggled those notes out of prison. Eberhard Bethge collected them, buried them in his back yard, incidentally, for safe keeping until the end of the war, and then he published them as Letters and Notes from Prison. And one of the notes read,

"I believe that God will give us all of the strength that we need to help resist in times of distress. But he never gives it in advance lest we should rely on ourselves and not on Him alone."

Mark says he'll be there. He'll be in the boat with you, but you won't be sure until the storm comes. But then you will find strength that you did not know you had, and you didn't think that you could make it, and you make it. You didn't think that you could go on, but something made you go on. Like Lillian Smith, the writer, suffering from cancer, who wrote although she wanted to give up she discovered that there was something inside of her that "pulls and pulls and pulls". And that pulling inside of you when you want to give up is evidence that you are not alone, that Jesus is there with you.

Mark, in His Gospel, pictures Jesus having the power to overcome all of the enemies of life. He comes onto the scene healing and casting out demons. He comes onto the scene like the hero in the last reel of a western, and all the demons when they see Him scurry for cover and the Main Street is cleared and He's ready for a showdown with the Pharisees. And in every confrontation He beats them to the draw. There isn't anything that He can't do, Mark says. There isn't any of our life that He can't conquer.

And now in the fourth chapter Jesus sails out into the Sea. And you get a deeper understanding of the meaning of this story when you realize that in those days it was believed that the sea was the home of demonic powers. All the enemies of life had their headquarters, as it were, in the sea. So when Jesus sails out into the sea He is sailing into enemy territory. He is working with the power of God as He stands up in the boat and says to the waves, "Peace, Be still."

#### CLOSING ILLUSTRATION

Some of you may remember that old play, "The Desperate Hours", where two escaped convicts take over a middle-class suburban home in Columbus, Ohio. A mother and father, two children, and they are held captive by two escaped convicts for some desperate hours. And in the final scene of the play the son in the family, a twelve-year old boy, is being held as a shield by one of the bandits who has a gun stuck in the little boy's back. But the boy doesn't know a vital truth about his situation, and that is that some time before his father managed to get to the two guns of the bandits. He unloaded one and he kept the other.

Now in the last scene the father stands across the room with the loaded gun. The bandit is holding the boy with an unloaded gun. The father alone knows that it is unloaded, and that everything will be all right if only the boy will trust him. If only the boy will run away from his captor.

"Ralph, listen to me" the father says to the boy. "That man is not going to hurt you". The convict says, "You try it, kid, and you'll find out". "Ralph" the father says, "Have I ever lied to you? Now I tell you, do exactly as I say,

because that gun is not loaded". And the bandit sticks the gun harder into the boy's back. "It has no bullets, Ralph. You understand. Now do as I say". and then he shouts, "Run!" And in a rush of faith the boy plunges across the room into his father's arms as the bandit's gun clicks uselessly, unable to hold him captive.

"I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth".  
He owns the place. "And in Jesus Christ His only Son, and our Lord."

"Why are you afraid" asks Jesus. "Have you no faith?"

PASTORAL PRAYER: September 8, 1975

O GOD of our beautiful and our burdened lives, we thank Thee for the blessings of this week just past, and pray that its many hardships may strengthen us to live yet more creatively in the week now before us.

GIVE US THE GIFT OF GREAT FAITH, that we may take our defeats and turn them into occasions for the victories You would have us celebrate and enjoy.

GIVE US FAITH, that in our loneliness we may know Your company, and in our distractions Your solitude.

GIVE US FAITH, to leave in Your hands the well-being of those we love so dearly, especially those whom we now quietly and privately name in our hearts before You.

BE where people hurt.

BE where people are healing.

BIND the broken hearts. HELP MEND the torn bodies and ease the restless, anxious minds.

O GOD - who while we rest neither slumbers nor sleeps, whose pain passes all understanding, we THY children bless Thee, for yet another gorgeous Summer Day has been granted us, one whose goodness and beauty we hope not to miss.

ONCE AGAIN, we pray to You for help and support....

NOT that we might do greater things, but that we might do better things.

NOT, that we might be spared life's pain, but that we might become wise.

NOT that we might have all things to enjoy life, but that we might be grateful that You have given us us life to enjoy all things.

TEACH US, LORD, that gladness is always at hand.

TEACH US, LORD, that contentment lies always in discerning the value of things we have.

AND IN THE PRESENCE OF our daily work, when there seems to little space for quiet, help us to remember Your Son, Our Lord, Jesus, who knew neither impatience of spirit nor confusion of work, but in the midst of all His labors kept a tranquil heart, a loving spirit, and a steady perspective on all things.

All of this we ask in the name of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ.