

"WHEN THE WIND DROPPED"

A Sermon By

Rev. Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church
106 East 86th Street
New York, New York 10028
Fourth Sunday After Easter
May 1, 1988

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TEXT: "And in the fourth watch of the night
He came to them walking on the sea"
(Matthew 14: 25)

INTRODUCTION

Mark Twain once visited the Holy Land and had to pay eight dollars to get across the Sea of Galilee. That was in 1880. "No wonder that Jesus walked" he remarked to his audience upon his return home as he shared the highlights of his trip. And last summer President Reagan in response to some criticism of the news media quoted something that LBJ had said twenty years ago,

"If I were to walk across the Potomac the press would probably say it was because I didn't know how to swim"

DEVELOPMENT

"And Jesus came to them walking on the water". The meditation today grows out of a story about Jesus and I shall try to tell the story with as much freshness as I can hoping that we shall catch in the ear of our imagination the wonderful overtones of it. It's one of my favorites and the story begins at the end of a very busy day.

Jesus, especially in the early part of His ministry, always had a hard time getting away from people. People followed Him wherever He went. On this particular occasion He had brought the disciples together and invited them to go away with Him for a while to rest and to relax. The only trouble was that upon their arrival at the chosen spot for this retreat they found people already there ahead of Him.

This time the crowd was unusually large. As you might expect, Jesus completely forgot about the rest, about Himself, and devoted all of His time to the people. He taught them all day and when evening came, He fed them in a rather unusual way...feeding a great many of them with very little food. When night came, He sent His disciples off by themselves in a boat to cross the Lake, back to the place where they had come from. He then dismissed the crowd and went up into the hills by Himself - to pray.

One of the things we notice over and over again in the life of Jesus is the fact that He was constantly surrounded by people. And yet, He always found the time to be quiet - to reflect, to pray, to meditate, to be alone with God. This was the source and secret of His amazing vitality.

HEART OF THE STORY

The next scene brings us to the heart of this story. It takes place between three and six o'clock in the morning when the light was just returning to the sky. Jesus was in prayer, but as He looked from the hillside, across the lake, He saw that His friends were in trouble in the boat on the lake. The wind was against them and they had not gotten very far. They were laboring at the oars and not making much headway.

Even in His prayers when He was alone with God, Jesus took His friends with Him. He could not erase from His consciousness the needs of those He loved the most, and absorbed as He may have been in the presence of God and concerned as He was about the things of God, yet that absorption was not so complete

that somewhere in His consciousness there was not an awareness of the friends and their distress.

So it is in our human experience that the more real our prayers are, the more likely we are to take into them the people we love the most. We do not and cannot pray in a vacuum. We pray in the context of human relationships, and when we go into God's presence we gather together all of the people we love and in our thoughts take them with us.

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Galilee, and the Biblical narrative says that He went to them "walking on the water".

Some people tend to shy away from such a story...not at home with the miraculous. It tends to upset all of our neat patterns of life and some would rather circumvent it than face it and deal with it. Did Jesus actually walk on the water. We do not know exactly what happened.

What is a miracle? Not the arbitrary rending of "natural law", but rather any event so ordered that it pierces our dullness or despair to convince us of the presence and the power of God. Someone has said "you're not a realist if you don't believe in miracles". I like that. This miracle blessed the disciples and our world "in Christ". The point is that He came in crisis, when the limits of human resource had been reached and passed. He came beyond their hope, for they did not expect Him. I, for one, am not so much interested in "how" Jesus got to His friends as I am in the fact that He went to them in their moment of distress and made a difference!

SOME REFLECTIONS

The older you get and the more experience you have in life and in human relationships, the more you know that love always finds a way - that there are no obstacles, no barriers that can keep one who loves from those whom he loves when they are in distress. Sometimes those barriers seem great, and yet somehow in the mystery of love they are overcome. As the poet writes,

"Stony limits cannot keep love out, and what
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Next Sunday is Mother's Day and we'll be thinking about our mothers and their love for us. Those lines from Kipling come to mind,

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I know whose love would follow me still.
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AND SO JESUS WENT

So Jesus went to His friends "walking on the water". But when they saw Him they were frightened. There was reason for them to be startled. They thought Him an apparition to fear rather than a Saviour to bless. We know there was nothing for them to be afraid of. When He reached them He said, "Take courage; it is I". "Do not be afraid". Their minds were diverted and absorbed by His presence. And they released to Him their fears.

The important thing to dwell on, I think, is the fact that the physical presence of Jesus gave them reassurance at a level deep enough to meet and counteract their apprehension.

To be sure, it is one of the mysteries of life that the physical touch between one person and another reaches a far deeper level emotionally than the spoken word. For instance, when a child is afraid, when panic paralyzes his face, you don't say to him, "Now, don't be afraid...." No - you take his hand in your hand and put your arm around him.

When one who is appointed to minister in the name of Christ goes to people at the time of severe illness or approaching death and enters the atmosphere of apprehension that often surrounds that even in the life of people, it is not what is said that counts, but rather the fact that one is there - physically present. My experience is often that the less said, the better. How much it means to a person to be there...close by, perhaps taking their hand in your own hand. The presence, the touch.

"And He got into the boat beside them, and the wind dropped...."

IS THERE ANYTHING LIKE THAT FOR US?

This story raises a question that I am raising briefly: is there anything like this for us now? Is there anything that takes the place of that close personal contact that people had with Jesus back then, or must we be content with the advice that comes down through the pages of the Bible from a great distance of two thousand years ago? In other words, can Jesus still come to us...walking on the water...or can He only speak to us across the years?

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"Don't be afraid; take this bread. It is a sign of My presence and My concern. This will make Me real to you; it is as though I got into the boat next to you, and the winds that were against you dropped."

CLOSING

As I thought about a title to this meditation, I felt led to call it, "When the Wind Dropped". Let me explain to you the reason why and follow it carefully here at the end.

Jesus, in the midst of His own prayers saw that His friends were in trouble...but the wind did not drop then. He went to them as He always went to people in trouble...but the wind did not drop them. To reach them He had to walk on the water...but the wind did not drop then. He spoke to them as He often spoke to people in trouble, spoke words of comfort and encouragement... but the wind did not drop then.

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PRAYER In the midst of our fears and anxieties, O God and Father, open our eyes that we may see the person of Jesus coming to us across the waters of life.

Help us to expect more and more of the love that will not let us go.

Help us to find in the bread and wine, in the people who serve Him, that close personal contact with Christ, which, when it comes into our lives calms us, quiets us, strengthens us. We ask this now in the spirit of Christ, our Lord.

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I. HOLY COMMUNION

- A. It is the custom....to celebrate the Sacrament of Holy Communion on the first Sunday....we like to announce.... that the Table of our Lord is open to all....one does not have to be a member...
- B. His Table is open to all...and we invite all of you... trusting that the time for you may be an occasion of...
- C. A brief word regarding procedure. The elements will be served to you in the pews...upon receiving them, please hold...

II. GREETING / VISITORS

- A. We pause to greet the visitors with ut today. We hope you'll return and worship with us on other Sunday. Be free in the sharing of your name.
- B. Fill out a visitor card. Sign the Guest Book. Join us downstairs for coffee. Come and work with us, too, in the programs of service.
- C. You worship in a Church whose roots are deep in the soil of this part of the city. Founded in 1837, recently celebrated our 150th birthday. We minister in the name of Christ and it is...

III. PARISH CONCERNS

- A. Note the word in the bulletin regarding tonight's Fellowship Supper. Sponsored by the Outreach Committee, it will focus on two community organizations that we generously support. Search and Care. Methodist Camp Service. Sue Chandler. Eleanor Minus. Both will be with us. Hope you will, too. Be sure to sign up downstairs for your contribution to the supper table and your sharing in that. Tonight. 6:30 pm.
- B. Be sure to "pick up" - May issue of monthly ne2s sheet. Copies...

IV. ENVELOPE IN THE PEW

- A. During the month of May we receive a special offering for the Health Care Agencies of the NY Conference. Your love gift may be given in the envelope in the pew. "More blessed to give than to receive". In this spirit...

(over)

V. MEETINGS THIS WEEK

- A. Note the meetings set for this week. Hounds on Tuesday. Membership Committee, 7:30 on Wednesday. Education Committee, 7:30 pm, Thursday. And remember that the Oratorio Society will be in Carnegie Hall on Wednesday evening, under Lyndon Wood's direction.

VI. ROSE ON ALTAR

- A. Rose on the altar again this morning...busy month... in honor of Kara Anne Hill Barclay, infant daughter of Ken and Christy Barclay, sister of Sam...born Tuesday, April 5th, 1988. NY Hospital.

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THE STORY The story begins at the end of a very busy day. Jesus, especially in the early part of His ministry, always had a hard time getting away from people. People followed Him wherever He went. On this particular occasion, he had gathered together His group of intimate friends - His disciples - and asked them to go away with Him for a while to rest and to relax. But as soon as they arrived at the place He had chosen for this retreat, they found that the crowd was already there ahead of Him.

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This is the reason why many have shied away from this story. We're not at home with the miraculous; it tends to upset all of our neat patterns of life and we would rather circumvent it than face it and deal with it. ~~I was once that way myself. I felt uncomfortable with this story and quietly passed it by. However, I feel I have changed as I have grown older. I do not know exactly what happened. I still do not know how Jesus got to His friends across the water - whether He actually walked on the water or not.~~

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PRAYER

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GROWS OUT OF A

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THE STORY

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2. The older you get and the more experience you have in life and in human relationships, the more you know that love always finds a way - that there are no obstacles, no barriers that can keep one who loves from those whom he loves when they are in distress. Sometimes those barriers seem great, and yet somehow in the mystery of love they are overcome. As the poet says,

"Stony limits cannot keep love out,
And what love can do, that dares love attempt"

The poetry of Rudyard Kipling is not at the peak of its popularity right now. In fact, some people might think it somewhat slightly maudlin, and yet we cannot entirely discount the sentiment that Kipling expressed when he thought of his mother and her love for him:

"If I were hanged on the highest hill,
I know whose love would follow me still.
If I were drowned in the deepest sea,
I know whose tears would come down to me.
If I were damned of body and soul,
I know whose prayers would make me whole"

If a mother's love in such a way can reach across all barriers of time and space and circumstance into the life of the child she loves, how much more can the love of God reach across the circumstances that separate you from Him and meet you in the time of your distress.

So Jesus went to his friend walking on the water. But when they saw him they were frightened. There was reason for them to be startled, and yet as we look back on the story, we know that there was nothing for them to be afraid of. When Jesus reached them he said, "Take courage - it is I. Do not be afraid". Their minds were diverted and absorbed by his presence. I think we know, if we have ever been the victims of deep, irrational, subconscious fears, that the more our conscious minds are absorbed by something that interests us and takes us out of ourselves, the more we are released from our fears.

But the important thing to dwell upon, I think, is the fact that the physical presence of Jesus gave them reassurance at a level deep

enough to meet and counteract their apprehension. To be sure, it is one of the mysteries of life that the physical touch between one person and another reaches a far deeper level emotionally than the spoken word. For instance, when a child is afraid, and I mean really afraid, when panic paralyzes his face, you don't say to him, "Now don't be afraid".....no, you take his hand in your hand, and put your around him. When one of us who is appointed to minister in the name of Christ goes to people at the time of severe illness or approaching death and enters the atmosphere of apprehension that often surrounds that event in the life of people, it is not what is said that counts, but rather the fact that one is there. My experience is that the less said, the better. All you have to do is be there, close by. Perhaps enfolding their hand in your hand. "And he got into the boat beside them, and the wind dropped".

IS THERE ANYTHING LIKE THAT FOR US?

This story raises a question that I am raising only briefly

and it is this: is there anything like that for us now? Is there anything that takes the place of that close personal contact that people had with Jesus? Or must we be content with the advice that comes down through the pages of the Bible from a great distance of two thousand years? In other words, can Jesus still come to us, walking on the water? Or can he only speak to us across the years?

Every Communion Service is one answer to that question. In one sense it is only a meal. We might even say less than a meal because it is not intended to nourish us physically. It is only a ceremonial meal. But it is an act so closely associated with Jesus of Nazareth and all that he meant and did that it becomes something more than a meal to us. It becomes a manifestation of himself. We do not attempt to explain it. All we can say is this * it is as though Jesus were saying to us in our lives, "Don't be afraid; take this bread; it is a sign of my presence, my concern. This will make me real to you; it is as though I got into the boat beside you, and the winds that were against you dropped."

If I were to give this meditation a title, it would be, "When the Wind Dropped". Jesus, in the midst of his prayer, saw his friends in distress, but the wind did not drop then. He went to them as he always went to people who were in trouble - to help them, and to reach them, he had to walk on the water, but the wind did not drop then. He spoke to them as he spoke to people often, and he spoke words of encouragement and comfort; but the wind did not drop then. Finally, he got into the boat beside them. It was then that the wind dropped.

PRAYER: In the midst of our fears and anxieties, O God, open our eyes that we may see the figure of Jesus coming to us

across the troubled waters of our lives. Help us to expect more and more of the love that will not let us go. And help us to find in the bread and wine, and in the men and women who serve him, that close personal contact with Christ, which, when it comes into our lives, releases us from our deepest fears. We ask this in his name. Amen