

1 Kings 19:9-18
Psalm 85:8-13
Romans 10:5-15
Matthew 14:22-33

Sermon for August 13, 2023

THE ANCHOR

By Rev. Dr. Don Algeo

Summary: Our anchor will hold in the storms of life.

I really dread thunderstorms. I never used to have any problem with them, but I do in recent years. And the reason for my change of attitude is my dog, Bitsy, whom many of you have met. Thunderstorms scare the living daylights out of her. When thunder hits she starts panting and trembling, and looking for somewhere to hide: it can be under the bed, under a dresser...in the most recent storm I found her crouching under the toilet. It just breaks your heart to see. And of course the worst part is that there's no way to offer her reassurance; no way to communicate with her that it won't last, the storm will be over sometime, the thunder will fade away, and life will return to normal.

Sometimes I think that the way I feel when Bitsy is cowering under the dresser must in some degree be like what God must feel, when He watches us undergoing the trials and tribulations of our lives. When something threatens our wellbeing, we often become as fixated on it as Bitsy is on the thunder, and God is murmuring, in a language we can't comprehend: Don't be so afraid, trust me, this too will pass. And God may even feel as sorry for our lack of understanding as I do for Bitsy's.

One thing we all know is that there are storms in everyone's life, and in most lives, there are occasionally storms that shake that person's very foundation. The storms

may take many different forms and affect our lives in many different ways, but all storms have certain things in common: they generally come on rather suddenly, they surprise and disorient us; they fill our hearts with fear and anxiety; they often seem unjust and unfair.

Think of some of the life storms that have affected you or the people you know and love”

- There are the storms of disease and injury that ravage our bodies and reveal to us how fragile we really are, and how tenuous our hold on health and life’s simple pleasures can be.
- There are the storms of death itself – the death of a loved one – a child, a friend, a spouse, especially an unexpected death.
- The storm of rejection, of divorce and abandonment.
- The storm of loss: loss of a job, loss of opportunity, loss of home, of income, of prestige.
- The storm of public humiliation and indignity.
- The storms of emotional distress: of hatred and anger, of resentment and bitterness, of spite, of self-pity, of self-righteous indignation, of moral outrage.

We’ve all experienced some or more of these storms, and we will all experience others. One thing we must realize as Christians, is that being followers of Jesus will not spare us from the storms, the trials and tribulations, of life. Even those who were closest to our Lord, his disciples, were not spared. In fact, as we saw in our scripture reading for this morning, it was Jesus Himself who sent them into the storm.

Now this may be a difficult thing to understand. Isn’t God the one who is supposed to protect us from the storms of life? After all, didn’t Jesus assure us in the tenth chapter of Matthew’s gospel that ‘the very hairs of your head are all numbered’?

But remember what comes right before that assurance in Matthew’s tenth chapter. Let me read a few samples: “...they will whip you in the synagogues...brother will hand over brother to be put to death...everyone will hate you...” Far from assuring them that their lives would be free from trial, Christ is instead assuring them that faith in God is what they need to overcome those trials, to rise from them strengthened and renewed.

So what can the inevitable trials of life teach us? What are the silver linings to seek for in the stormy clouds? Today I’m going to talk about three things.

Looking at our passage from Matthew, one thing we see is that Jesus sent his disciples into the storm to protect them from temptation. It is the occasion on which Jesus fed the great multitude from a few loaves and fishes, and after that great miracle, the crowd rose up and clamored for Jesus to proclaim himself King and Messiah, right there and then. And it is at that point that Jesus dismisses the crowd and sends his disciples out onto the lake without him.

Put yourselves back into the situation Jesus was facing. The desire of the crowds to make him king of Israel was not a temptation to Jesus. He had already conquered that temptation back before he even began his ministry, during his confrontation with Satan in the wilderness. He knew he was the Messiah, the King, but he also knew his kingdom was not that for which his fellow Jews, including his disciples, were seeking. They were looking for a political and military leader, one who could muster their armies and lead them in victorious combat to throw off the yoke of Rome. The tyranny of Rome was much more in their thoughts than the tyranny of sin, but it was the tyranny of sin – not that of Rome – that Jesus knew he had been sent to conquer. His Kingdom would be the Kingdom of God, not of Israel. As he later said to Pontius Pilate: My kingdom is not of this world.

What Jesus knew was that the desire of the crowds would be a temptation, not to him, but to his disciples. Here was the great promise of success! They saw the huge crowds gathering from far away to listen to their Master; they saw the adoration in their eyes, heard it in their shouts of acclamation; they saw the wonderful miracles, the healings, the multiplication of foods...and now the people want to crown their Master as King? Why, they might themselves be Secretary of State! Secretary of Education! Perhaps Judas dreamed to being Secretary of the Treasury!

And so Jesus sent them away to face a storm, a storm that would defeat their own best efforts, that would reveal their utter and complete dependence upon him.

And how does that apply to us? What we learn is that God sometimes allows us to undergo trials, perhaps even manufactures those trials, to protect us from the temptations of self-satisfaction, of fame and popularity, to dedication to worldly success and honor. The temptation to make ourselves the center of attention, rather than God.

You think I'm an arrogant know-it-all now, you should have seen me fifty years ago, back when I was a rising star in the academic firmament, credentialed to the max and ready to take my rightful place among the great thinkers of history. In my own mind, I was smarter, more morally and politically correct, and better-looking

that everyone I met. I condescended to Paul Newman in person, for Pete's sake: and you can't get more obnoxiously arrogant than that.

Well, a series of storms derailed that career, and although they seemed devastating and even humiliating as I was living through them, these days I thank God every day that He used those storms to hurl me off the pedestal on which I'd placed myself, to break me into pieces, and begin refashioning those pieces into something at least a little less spiritually intolerable. Those storms cured me from the spiritual pride of worldly self-satisfaction, just as that storm on the lake of Galilee did for Christ's disciples.

A second thing we can learn from our passage is that Jesus, although unseen, was with his disciples on their storm.

Remember that this was no small storm the disciples were caught in; the Sea of Galilee because its unique geography, was famous for its sudden and violent storms. The disciples of Jesus had been rowing for several hours and they, some of them professional fisherman, were exhausted. You've got to imagine a small boat packed with men, bucking and heaving in the violent waves. The night is dark, the winds are howling, the rain is pounding down and all sense of direction is lost. The bones of countless sailors lie at the bottom of that lake, and the disciples must have feared their own bones would soon be added to that pile.

Yet even while his disciples were out there struggling in the storm to which Jesus had sent them, Jesus Himself was up praying in the hills. And we can be certain, that in his prayers – even though there were many other things on his mind, including the cross – we can be certain he was praying for his disciples out there on their boat, being tossed about on the stormy sea. And as long as they were in His prayers – in the prayers of Jesus – no matter how threatening their circumstances seemed, no matter how hopeless, they were safe.

And what can this tell us about the trials that we ourselves experience?

It can tell us that trials, while never enjoyed, serve a worthwhile purpose in our lives, if they teach and train us to trust in Jesus. Not all of our testings are of life-shattering, life-changing proportions. Most of our difficulties are relatively small. But if we can learn to trust in Jesus, even in those distractions and minor troubles, it will strengthen us for the greater trials that must inevitably come. How we deal with losing our job can prepare us for how we deal with losing our health; how we deal with someone telling a lie about us can prepare us for when real injustice occurs.

“We glory in tribulations,” Paul wrote to the Romans (ch 5), “knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; perseverance produces character, and character produces hope.”

And finally, perhaps most importantly, we learn that Jesus, even when he seems absent, is always aware of and paying attention to your difficulty. Even though he is up on a mountain somewhere, he is always here with you. He is perfectly aware of what you’re experiencing, of your doubts and fears, even of your resistance to Him.

For always remember, Jesus came unexpectedly to his disciples in the midst of their storm. They weren’t scanning the crashing waves for a sign of him, they weren’t crying out to him, they weren’t praying...they were simply lost, and bewildered, and afraid. Jesus came to them, not because he was summoned, but because he knew they needed him.

So in summation one thing is certain: we do face, we have faced, and we will face storms in our lives. Such storms often come suddenly, without warning, and sometimes bring the possibility of complete devastation. They emphasize our complete helplessness and often leave us with nowhere to turn, unless we are walking in complete trust with our Lord. An old hymn asks the question: “Will your anchor hold in the storms of life, when the clouds unfold their wings of strife. When the strong tides lift and the cables strain, will your anchor drift or firm remain?”

No situation is so difficult, no danger so overwhelming, no prospect so hopeless, that the love and strength of Jesus cannot overcome it. When the night is darkest, Jesus brings the dawn. When the heart is most afraid, Jesus brings courage. When all hope is lost, Jesus brings salvation. It is accomplished, Jesus cried out from the cross. Your rescue is accomplished, your salvation is secured, your future is eternal, your anchor will hold.

And so, this morning, Father, we pray that our trials may serve as training grounds, that our testings may bring us closer to you, that our storms teach us that there is only one safe harbor, the harbor of your love, only one seaworthy boat, the ark of your covenant, only one firm anchor, the anchor of Your sacrifice, and only one perfect Captain, our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray.