

Dealing With an Approaching Storm
Maundy Thursday, March 28, 1991

Luke 22:14-23

Mark Dunn

Storms are literally a real part of human existence. When I was a boy growing up on a farm in rural Georgia, tornadoes and severe thunderstorms were a common occurrence. This was before the days of color radar and the systematic warnings from the local weather person. The way we predicted a serve storm was watching for dark clouds, paying careful attention to the severity of the thunder, lightening and the wind. Believe me, those conditions seemed to be magnified while living in an old farm house with pecan tree branches beating against the tin roof.

We were the only family in the community that had an underground cellar where the canned foods were stored. I have had my father awaken my brother and I out of a deep sleep at 2 or 3 o'clock in the morning to make a dash for the cellar. In the dark hours of the morning, we have had neighbors drive up and make a dash for the safety of that old cellar. Now we have a white family and an Afro-American family huddled together seeking protection from an approaching storm.

Dealing with the approaching storms of life can cause considerable anxiety and sleepless nights. To deal with this theme, I want to first reflect on the storms of life that can be seen before they arrive. Second, reflect on how to deal with them in light of the gospel; and third, how to be in this anxious process.

I. STORMS THAT CAN BE PREDICTED

However, Jesus knew there was a storm brewing. He said to his disciples:

I have earnestly desired to eat this passover with you before I suffer;...(vs. 15)

Later, in the garden, Jesus "began to be horror-stricken and desperately depressed." The J. B. Phillips translates the Greek in such a way that it gives the words that Jesus spoke power: "My heart is nearly breaking" said Jesus to the disciples.(Mk. 14:34) Jesus could see a storm brewing that greatly affected his future. Many times we see a crisis coming before it happens. The way to affirm is by a few examples.

A. One example is the anxiety of being called upon to answer for past decisions. Joe Anthony, writing in the *Reader's Digest* tells of receiving a large white envelope. He froze as he read those first lines from the computerized letter: "We selected your Federal Income Tax return for the year shown below to examine the items listed...." He was being audited by the IRS. What gives Joe additional stress is the statistics associated with IRS audits.

Only seven percent of audits results in refunds; 73 percent result in more taxes, and 20 percent produce no change. The average tax plus penalty is an unsettling \$4290.(p.105)

To say the least, Joe or anyone else who receives one of those large white envelopes is facing an approaching storm as count-down to audit day arrives.

B. Another storm concerns the issue of numerous birthdays and how aging affects the enjoyment of life. In the years since I have been here at First Church, I have had people tell me that my hair is grayer now. One thing is for certain, I wear a piece of jewelry when I read that I didn't used to wear. In fact, it has become a major task for myself and family to keep up with the three pairs of Walgreen's glasses. I never seem to have them when I need them.

Previously, when I visited parishioners in the hospital, I climbed the stairs to the seventh floor. Now, I ride the elevator up and take the stairs on the way down. I thought I was going to slow this aging process down with a regular exercise program of jogging. Now, I get tired just watching the joggers run. I have begun to experience what Fred Shoenberg, in his book, *The Middle Age Rage*, calls: "Spontaneous spouse-activated, aural dysfunction." This is a "built-in conditioned reflex" which automatically answers "Fine" or "That's Okay," or "I'll take care of it," whenever your spouse makes requests of you. Later, you discover you have agreed to buy her a new dress or her husband a new suit and you can't remember agreeing to this request. We sense an approaching storm associated with more birthdays. That's the reason we tell people, "I am 39 and holding."

C. The last approaching storm which we sometimes can see coming our way is what Wayne Oates calls "anticipatory grief" and dying. This is one of those very serious storms which challenges our faith. My chaplain supervisor said that it is not death that really causes anxiety, it is the process of dying. The state of Wisconsin, along with most other states, has a new legal document which gives us some control over the use of life support systems. Based on your values, this document "gives the person whom you specify broad powers to make health care decisions for you" if you are unable to do so. It is ironic that Jesus knew that in a few hours people in authority would be making decisions about his health that did not have his best interest at heart. It wouldn't have helped his situation to have filled out the "Power of Attorney for Health Care " form.

Anticipatory grief on the other hand concerns the knowledge that your loved one doesn't have long to live in this physical world. In her research, Elisabeth Kubler-Ross discovered that the dying and the family that waits goes through a grieving process of "denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance."(p.27-8) I still have my parents with me. But I know one of these days I will be able to see that approaching storm of anticipatory grief.

There are other anticipatory storms which we see coming other than an IRS storm, loss of physical stamina, and anticipatory grief and dying. One anticipatory storm which inspired this sermon was the crisis in the Persian Gulf. Like you, I was constantly checking the news from radio and T.V.. My denial wouldn't let me believe that the war had truly started. I kept saying, "I can't believe this!" Jesus, on the other hand, knew that the storm was coming before it arrived.

II. WHAT TO DO WHEN A STORM APPROACHES

We realize there are storms that can be seen approaching. More importantly, what do we do when we see those dark clouds forming? There are no completely easy answers, but we can make decisions which help us to cope.

A. The first is to gather together with others. The writer of Hebrews said, "Do not neglect to meet together."(10:25) The storm clouds of execution were forming for Jesus and what did he do? He gathered together with his disciples to share the Passover Meal and to institute the Lord's Supper. When families discover that their loved one is dying, what do they do; gather themselves together.

In fact, it is usually the wishes of the dying that they see their children and their spouse just one more time. My wife Diana works on the oncology floor of a nearby hospital. She has observed patients who have accepted the inevitable, holding on until their child can arrive from California or some far off place. She has also seen them sitting up laughing and sharing in that family reunion. The family goes home for the night after that happy reunion. Within a few hours they are gone. But they died happy because they gathered together one last time.

On the farm when life and limb was threatened by a gathering storm, the family gathered together in the cellar. The same can be said for that meeting with the IRS representative. Joe Anthony suggested that you take your "tax preparer" with you to meet your friendly IRS agent. Your accountant has an advantage over you. He or she is "emotionally detached from an audit" and therefore more objective. When storm clouds are building, gather yourself together into a community of faith.

B. Second, nourish your faith through prayer. Jesus prayed a prayer of anguish in the garden but he prayed his way through to acceptance. Acceptance of the inevitable did not destroy his faith but enhanced it because of his prayerful relationship with the Heavenly Father. He knew internally that "nothing can separate us from the love of God."

Wayne Oates told of visiting a "revered teacher during his last illness." That teacher asked him to "kneel by his bed that he might give him his blessing by praying for both of (them)." In his prayer, he gave thanks for the gift of a new life in the resurrection. He made a general confession of sin and then prayed for

courage as he faced the greatest storm of his life.(p.31) It is important to pray as you face the storms of life.

C. Another thing to do is to search for the "Good News." The gospel for us is the Good News that God loves us. Murphy Davis, the Director of Southern Prison Ministry, in Atlanta, Georgia, tells of taking a friend who was a theologian to visit one of his parishioners on death row. The inmate waiting for execution was a black man by the name of Billy Mitchell.

As all three of them sat down together, Billy Mitchell fixed the chaplain's theologian friend in his gaze and with no further ado, asked: "So,.....what's the good news?" Chaplain Davis said the question kind of "hung in the air like a curious object." Now a clergyman and an ambassador of the "Good News" were grappling for an answer. What would be "good news" for Billy Mitchell. Maybe for that moment it was the fact that God loves him and not even death can separate him from God's love.

What is the "good news" for those us who have experienced a few birthdays? The good news is that in God's love for us, He calls us to use the creative gifts he gave us. Jack Botwinick in his book *We are Aging*, reminds us that some famous people were most creative in their autumn years. "Michelangelo was the chief architect of St. Peter's from age 72 to 89. At 83 Thomas Jefferson was "devoted to planning the University of Virginia." The good news from God is that we are still useful for the work of God's Kingdom.

CONCLUSION

More than what we do when we are facing the storm clouds of life, there is, what to be. That is, brave and courageous. As Jesus faced the angry crowds, Pilate, and the cross, he did so with courage. From the Jungian psychological prospective, this is utilizing the "warrior energy." Dr. Robert Moore said that "this means that he has an unconquerable spirit."(p.83)

A few months ago our country sent thousands of our young men and women off to free Kuwait. They accomplished the task of "Desert Storm" in part because they were courageous, disciplined and worked together as a team.

Jesus Christ accomplished the will of God because He was courageous in going to the cross. May we be His disciples by being the same. Amen.