

Surviving the Storm

By the Rev. Robert McCluskey -- Sunday, September 10, 1995

Bible Reading

Some went down to the sea in ships,
 doing business on the mighty waters;
they saw the deeds of the Lord,
 his wondrous works in the deep.
For he commanded and raised the stormy wind,
 which lifted up the waves of the sea.
They mounted up to heaven, they went down to the depths;
 their courage melted away in their calamity;
they reeled and staggered like drunkards,
 and were at their wits' end.
Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble,
 and he brought them out from their distress;
he made the storm be still,
 and the waves of the sea were hushed.
Then they were glad because they had quiet,
 and he brought them to their desired haven.
Let them thank the Lord for his steadfast love,
 for his wonderful works to humankind.
Let them extol him in the congregation of the people,
 and praise him in the assembly of the elders.

(Psalm 108:23-32)

Reading from Swedenborg

"The wind of the tempest," and thus "the waves of the sea lifted up," signify temptations; and as spiritual temptations come through falsities breaking into the thoughts, which is the source of remorse of conscience and grief of mind and spirit, these are signified by "the wind of the tempest stood, and He raised up its waves on high"; deliverance from them is signified by "He made the tempest to stand still, that the waves might be hushed." . . .

This miracle of the Lord, like all the rest, involves arcana of heaven and interior things of the church. The difference between Divine miracles and those not Divine is that Divine miracles also signify Divine things, because the Divine is in them, while miracles not Divine signify nothing, because there is nothing of the Divine within them; and moreover, in the description of the Divine miracles in the Word, and in every particular thereof, there is a spiritual sense. This miracle involved spiritual temptations; "a great storm of wind, so that the waves beat into the boat, and it was filling," signifies such temptations; and that when they were in extreme fear, "Jesus awoke, and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, Be still, be dumb; and the wind ceased, and there was a great calm," signifies deliverance from temptations. Moreover, every single word here contains a spiritual sense. . .the "storm" and "tempest of wind" signify temptations, for these are irruptions of falsities, or inundations of the mind by falsities. This, too, is plain from the rebuke of the wind and the waves, and from the words of the Lord to the sea, "Be still, be dumb," as if He were speaking to those things or those persons that induce temptations. (Apocalypse Explained #419)

Sermon

In Psalm 107, we are given the image of sailors caught in a storm at sea, reeling to and fro like drunken men, and their salvation by calling upon the Lord. This psalm also describes others in difficult circumstances: those who wander in the wilderness, those who are held captive in prison for foolishly transgressing the law, and those who dwell in a lifeless desert. And it also describes their salvation by calling upon the Lord. In Mark 4 we are given a similar set of images: The disciples set out in a boat to cross over the lake, encounter a storm, and, fearing for their lives, call upon the Lord to bring them safely to the other side.

Each of these images describes specific, inner states of being we are all prone to. They describe our experience of going astray, of finding ourselves lost in a state of fear, emptiness, hopelessness, or despair; they describe also the experience of being found, rescued, saved, redeemed, brought out of those lower, negative states by the Lord. We all know this feeling of being separated from God, captive to our egos, wandering in a wilderness of fear and darkness. We all know the feelings of failure, disappointment, shattered dreams and broken relationships; stormy feelings of anger, regret and envy. All of these things can lead eventually to a dimming of our faith. We begin to doubt the value and

validity of our higher ideals and motives. What do the inner travails of the spirit mean? How do we handle such experiences? How do we interpret and respond to them? What is it we can learn from them?

Throughout the Bible, the image of setting out on a journey represents the decision to pursue the path of regeneration, spiritual growth. The Lord's call for his disciples to go over to "the other side" represents the Lord's call for us to move from darkness to light, from lower to higher, from the natural to the spiritual. When we first hear this call, it seems like a good idea: the promise of new life, freedom from that which oppresses us, a greater sense of purpose and meaning, a fulfilling and positive experience. And yet, as experience and doctrine make clear, the journey soon reveals its own struggles, difficulties, and perils. Such a decision will lead us to a greater sense of inner combat between our old ways and our new, emerging sense of self. Swedenborg notes that not everyone makes this decision to cross over. Those who don't will also experience struggle and combat in their lives, but it will not lead to a new level of insight and feeling; rather, it will become the routine of life to which one is resigned, lacking in imaginative vision, purposeful activity, meaningful relationships.

The storm that came upon the disciples, the errant wandering of the psalmist, the reeling to and fro, all represent the initial experience we have in life of our own limitations, our own pride and arrogance, our own misconceptions about the spiritual life. As one example, the image of drunkenness in the Bible represents a state of being in error as a result of reasoning about spiritual matters from the limited understanding of the proprium, our proud but foolish lower self. The result is the excitement and confusion we feel when we are intoxicated with our own ideas, and unable to relate clearly to the truth and meaning of our lives.

Each of us is born unconscious, unenlightened, unregenerate, psychologically intoxicated, asleep. If we do not act in life, we can never come to know who we are, where we need to go; we will remain unconscious, asleep. And yet, if we act, we will surely fail, make mistakes, be deceived. In striving to become conscious, while yet unconscious, we will act on wrong principles, for the wrong reasons, and from the wrong motives. We call this going astray, wandering, getting lost. Our good ideas and best-laid plans get nowhere; or worse, they lead to feelings of disappointment and failure, a loss of self-esteem, and a tendency to fatalism: This is our inner storm.

It is just this state of affairs that is pictured in our story from Mark. As we make the journey toward consciousness, we do so in a state of spiritual sleep, imaged by the Lord sleeping in the boat. He is with us on the path of regeneration, but we have not yet learned that we cannot reach our destination without calling on Him ourselves.

This is necessary if we are to develop into free, conscious beings, able to share in the human qualities of love and truth. Only a person who is not yet perfected makes mistakes. But when we learn from our

experiences, including our mistakes, we will awaken, grow, and be brought to new life. It is part of the paradox, the mystery, the truth of the spiritual life, that we must give up and get over many of those things that we care deeply about. It is not about giving up things that don't matter, but things which seem to matter a great deal. Both in the psalm and in Mark, the wind and storm refer to the dispersion of apparent or external goods and truths of those who are interiorly in falsehood. It is the stripping away of our false pride and short-sightedness, the loss of that which seems so important, so essential to our lives.

It is at this point that we can pierce the veil of our lives, and discern the spiritual import of our more mundane and out-ward difficulties. If we dig deep enough, if we ask the question "Why?" enough, and in the right way, our daily struggles can tell us much about our spiritual state. And in so doing, we will be brought to light. Like the lost sheep and the prodigal son, we will be found out, by ourselves and by God. This being led out of our sins is experienced by us as a kind of enlightenment, an awareness of our true nature not just as fairly childish ego-centrists (which we are), but as beings capable of entering into new life at any moment, simply by giving up on the illusory goals and understanding of life that can never succeed any-way.

Inner storms of the spirit are a constant possibility for us as human beings. Our lives, our ongoing growth, require that we face our "shadow": those parts of ourselves that still dwell in darkness, fear, and doubt. Our growth requires that we experience some of the real pain and illusion that our minds are capable of generating, and that we humbly acknowledge the impossibility of freeing ourselves from them. When spiritual storms arise within us, threatening our peace of mind and sense of purpose, we must turn inward, to those spiritual realities which so often lie dormant, sleeping within our hearts and minds. The afflicted in the psalm, finding no relief from their own strivings, called upon the Lord to deliver them, to bring them out of the falsities of their thinking, out of the narrow limitations imposed by the ego. The disciples looked for their salvation, not in the movement of the wind, but in the Lord who was already with them. The salvation we seek is not from our circumstances, but from ourselves.

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Prayer

So many times, Lord, we become afraid and fear for our very lives as the waves of temptations seek to drown us. In our distress, we call upon you to intervene and save us. Help us, dear Lord, to call upon you and thank you when things are right and we are not afraid. Help us build that trust which your love gives to each of us so that when the waves of evil seek to drown us, we know with certainty that you are here and will save us. Amen.