

“Into the Storm”

Luke 22:39-53

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Palm Sunday, April 9, 2017

As I shoveled out of the snowstorm on March 14th, it reminded me of the Blizzard of '93 which terrorized the east coast almost a quarter century ago on March 13th. The mighty footsteps of that monster marched up the coast. You knew it was coming. Everyone knew it. Empty store shelves, taped windows, candles by the bedside. We prepared, hunkered down, and waited in the calm peaceful hours before it arrived. Then, at night, the monster pounced on us. Its savage breath knocked down trees, bit through power lines and tore off roofs. We awoke the next day to see the whole world frozen in white. Meteorologists dubbed it “The Storm of the Century” – a tornado, hurricane and snow storm rolled into one. Billions of dollars of damage. Three hundred ten died. So awesome was this avalanche of snow that schools were closed for days and nearly every church was shut for the first time in anyone’s memory.

While I waited for the storm to come on Friday night, I received a call from my wife Lisa who was attending a Physical Therapy Seminar in New Jersey. “Honey, I’ve decided to stay at a hotel for the weekend, instead of driving home,” she said “But Lisa, I’m worried,” I replied. “Don’t worry about me,” she said comfortingly, “I’ll be alright.” “I’m not worried about you, I’m worried about me being stuck in this house with an 8 year old and 5 year old for two days.” We actually had a wonderful time playing cards, reading stories, having our own worship service and watching three videos two times each. I also learned Physical Therapists like to play practical jokes. At the height of the storm they called the Dominos Pizza guy to see if he could deliver in 30 minutes or less.

Have you ever faced a storm? I’m not talking about a meteorological disturbance, but a physical, emotional, spiritual disturbance. At first it’s clear sailing. Then the wind changes. Suddenly the barometer of your life falls, hot and cold fronts conspire to squeeze you into a tight position, a wind chill blows across your soul.

Sometimes we hear the forecast and see the clouds coming. Sometimes they catch us off guard: a letter from the IRS. A phone call from the lawyer about the court date. The seven projects due in the next three days. The bills piled up on the desk. The desk at work that you’ve just cleaned out. The kids want to live with their other parent. The tests come back from the lab. The bottles or pills hidden in the basement. The text from a teen that’s left home. The flower placed on the coffin before you walk away.

I’m headin’ into a storm. What do I do now God?

Jesus knows about storms. It’s Thursday night. The cheers and hosannas of Palm Sunday have faded. As night falls, Jesus senses a tempest is brewing, a storm is coming. He can read the winds and feel the climate change. Many times he forecast this storm to the disciples.

Jesus took the Twelve aside and told them, “We are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written by the prophets about the Son of Man will be fulfilled. He will be delivered over to the Gentiles. They will mock him, insult him and spit on him; they will flog him and kill him. On the third day he will rise again.” (Luke 18:31-33)

Every time Jesus made this prediction either the disciples did not listen or they did not understand. Yet Jesus knows the storm will strike tonight, Passover night. Already the darkness is gathering. Even the twelve feel a strange sadness and grief, a chill in the air and in their souls.

Together, the small company leaves the house where they shared their supper. They make their way through darkened streets and pass out the city gate. Up the Kidron Valley they walk past ancient and eerie tombs. Finally they arrive at the Mount of Olives, their usual meeting place, the spot where Jesus taught them many things that week. But He has no lesson from them this evening. The storm is coming and they need to get ready. Not a storm of wind or rain but a storm of suffering and death. “Wait here,” he commands, “And pray that you do not give into temptation, that you do not fail the test.” Then He walks into the darkness, alone, to prepare.

Jesus can see that all the elements are in motion. Soon, one of His own intimate followers, a person who daily ate at His table, sat at His feet, walked by His side, a disciple whose feet he just washed will use those feet to lead a band of priests and guards to arrest Him. Judas will not betray Him with an accusing finger or a stinging slap on the face. With open arms and a loving kiss he will seal his Master’s fate. In less than an hour, Jesus’ right hand man, his closest companion on earth will stand before a group of mere serving boys and girls and shout he never met the Man. Peter will deny his Master three times and Jesus will have to hear it. The small circle of students in whom He invested so much love and attention will desert Him in His hour of need. Yes, the storm is coming: arrest, trumped up charges, tortures, and crucifixion. And He will weather it alone.

How do you face a storm of suffering? The disciples display the whole range of human reaction as they cope with this crisis.

Some avoid suffering by trying to shut it out. Luke says the disciples were so filled with grief that they fell asleep. Have you ever gone to bed angry? Have you ever felt so blue you just didn’t want to get up in the morning? Avoiding the pain puts it off, but doesn’t make it go away.

There are painful times when we attack or lash out as when Peter swung his sword and cut off a slave’s ear. Suffering can cause us to attack those around us even when they are not responsible for our pain. All this does is drive away the people we need for support.

A common way to deal with suffering is denial as when Peter denied the Lord. “I don’t have a problem. I don’t have an addiction. I can handle this. I don’t need to change. I don’t need your help.” Denial blinds you to the danger until it’s too late.

And last, there is the urge to run away as the disciples did when Jesus was arrested. Sometimes the hurt is so intense you just want to escape from your job, your home, your life.

Avoid, attack, deny, desert. That's the way we deal with suffering. But Jesus did none of these. Here He is, alone in a grove of olive trees. Across the valley He can clearly see the Temple, looming large in the flickering torch light. Perhaps His mind goes back to that day, three years before when Satan placed Him on the highest point of the Temple and shouted, "Jump and see if your Father loves you enough to save you." He remembers how the Deceiver offered Him an easy way out. "All the kingdoms of the world can be yours at no extra cost. All you have to do is bend your knees and worship me. Act now and avoid the Passover rush ... the torture...and the crucifixion. It's that simple." Satan tried to place two questions in Jesus' mind, "Does my Father love me?" and "Why must I suffer?"

Does God love me? Why am I suffering? Two questions which plague all of us at one time or another. How did Jesus handle the approaching pain, how did He face the impending storm? He prayed. "Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me." (Luke 22:42) This prayer reveals that God the Son is also human to the core. He feels real fear, anxiety and dread. It isn't the arrest, the torture, or the disgraceful death that He fears. It's what is in the cup. His Father holds out to Him a cup that brims over with all the suffering and sin of the world: Hiroshima, Auschwitz, 9/11, the Black Plague, every evil in human history. Jesus knows He will have to taste it. He knows He will have to drink it. He will have to drain it to the dregs. And He will have to take the cup alone.

At this moment, for the first time in His life, He experiences the silence of God. Throughout His ministry Jesus often communed with His Father in prayer. At the most crucial moments – His baptism, His transfiguration – the Father even spoke back. But now the Father offers the cup in silence. In this hour of darkness and decision, there are no words. Without any answer from His Father, Jesus speaks into the silent darkness, "Yet not my will, but yours be done." (Luke 22:42) If the storm is coming, I'm ready.

When I visit someone who is going through a storm, the question I often hear is "Why me? Why am I suffering?" What can I say to such a cry except, "I don't know"? In this world where sin and evil run wild, I do not believe there is always a reason for suffering. But does God care? Does He understand my pain? Most assuredly yes. The Son of God felt the fear, the pain and the silence that we feel. There is not a drop of suffering in this world He has not tasted from that cup. There is not a sin in this world He did not bear on that Cross. God is with you in the storm. He knows. He understands. He cares. Even in the silence, He is on His knees beside you.

"And what is God doing about my pain?" We see in the Garden of Gethsemane that God's will is not always to take away the suffering. The storms and rains fall on the just and the unjust. But it is God's will to ultimately bring good out of evil, light out of darkness, life out of death. For by the death of His Son, the greatest suffering this world has ever seen, the Father saves our lives.

Deep in the mountains of Niigata Prefecture, in the snow country of northern Japan, lies the tiny town of Tokamachi. Heavy snowfalls can isolate towns in the area for days. During the worst blizzard to hit the area in thirteen years, work crews labored day and night to clear the roads. As the snowfall seemed to be letting up on Thursday, Mrs. Tomiko Takano, 37, ventured out on an errand with her daughter. Her husband left the house earlier to join the road clearing crews.

While Tomiko and her seven-year-old daughter Izumi went outside to clear a path to the road, an unusually large pile of snow on the roof suddenly gave way and buried both mother and daughter beneath nearly ten feet of snow.

When Mr. Takano returned later in the day he was shocked to discover his wife and daughter were missing. Immediately he launched a search throughout the neighborhood. They were not found. The next day, a work party clearing snow from around the Takano home heard a soft whimpering from a huge mound of snow beside the house. Frantically, they dug toward the sound and discovered Mrs. Takano's frozen body curled around Izumi. Because of her love, Tomiko Takano gave her own life to save Izumi's life.¹

What will you do when the storm comes? Fight? Flight? Or Fall on your knees and trust the One who gave His life to shelter you from the storm? It takes courage and faith to face the silence and say, "Thy will be done." But it's the best way to weather the storm. Amen

¹ Bob Boardman, "No Greater Love," Discipleship Journal (March/April 1986)