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“Seasons of Prayer” Matthew 14:22-33

Introduction

Any of us who have lived in Erie, PA have heard the joke about the four seasons we enjoy: almost winter, winter, winter nearly done and road construction. Different seasons, different activities, different memories!

This morning I want to preach on the theme seasons of prayer as we begin this new year with an emphasis on prayer. Although I should always feel compelled in this area of prayer, I especially feel compelled to prayer right now. Perhaps it is because personally I sense a weakness in this area. Perhaps a sense that as a church we need to re-group in this area. Whatever the combination of factors, I do sense a burden regarding prayer that I hope to communicate in the Spirit's power this morning.

During this message, I urge you to listen to the Word, be responsive to the Spirit, and personalize this message in your life personally as well as engage in reflection on prayer's role in the congregation.

So consider this morning how we must pray in seasons of “stillness” and in seasons of “storms”. Let me explain each season, explore an illustration of such a season, and draw forth some timeless principles from these texts on how to prayer in such seasons.

We must pray in the season of stillness

First, we must pray in the season of stillness. "Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go before him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up on the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone," (Matthew 14:22-23).

Let me set the context for this text. Matthew, of course, is the first of four gospels, which record the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In Matthew 14-16, there are three main themes: Jesus' teaching of his twelve followers called disciples, the repeated failures by the twelve to understand or respond to Jesus' teaching and some small glimmerings of true faith and growth.

Matthew 14:1-21 record one of the greatest miracles during Jesus' life: the feeding of 5000 people, likely a number referring to 5000 men. If you add women and children, you have upwards to 20,000 or more being miraculously nourished by the five loaves and two fishes given to Jesus by a boy. The setting for the miracle is that Jesus had been teaching this large gathering for most of the day in a somewhat remote area. Dinner time was approaching and there was no way all of these people would be able to travel

and get food to eat. Therefore, Jesus purposed to feed them. After they were fed, the disciples gathered the “leftover” up in and discovered their were twelve large baskets of food remaining.

Then Matthew states, “Immediately Jesus made the disciples get into the boat. . . while he dismissed the crowds. This had been a long, long day—teaching, feeding 5000+ people. But what he does is strange indeed. He compels his disciples to get into their boat, row across the northern tip of the Sea of Galilee, probably several miles across, but never more than a mile or two from the shore and meet him in Capernaum. And then he dismissed the crowds.

The words for “made” and “dismissed” are rather forceful words. More than likely the disciples didn't want to leave Jesus because they were following quite earnestly. Perhaps several who were experienced fishermen saw something in the weather conditions to tip them off that a storm was brewing over the Sea. Neither does it seem the crowds were especially eager to leave, having listened to one who taught like no other man did—one who taught with great authority. And having been well supplied with a meal, some began to think about how they could make Jesus king and could overthrow the Romans. (John 6:14-15).

This was one of the likely reasons Jesus exercised His authority and broke up this happy gathering. These verbs “made” and “dismissed” clearly shows that Jesus' “hour had not yet come” and that he firmly controlled the events of his life. Jesus not only exercised authority over this situation, but we know that he has authority over all men, including final judgment. He has authority over all the supernatural world inc. the evil world of Satan and his demonic fallen angels. The crowds recognized his teaching authority (Matt 7:29) and in his Great Commission, he declared “all authority has been given to me.” (Matt 28:18).

Why did Jesus dismiss this gathering then? For several reasons. First, the enthusiasm of the crowds to make him king. This was none other than a reigniting of Satan's third temptation in the wilderness—when he offered all the kingdoms of the world to Jesus if he would bow down to the devil. By doing this, he would bypass the cross and avoid the agony of having to take the sin of the world upon Himself. Often, we think that Jesus didn't encounter temptation before the Matthew 4 encounter with Satan in the wilderness and that he never again faced temptation till maybe Gethsemane. But Luke 4:13 states only that the devil “departed until an opportune time.” So, he made the disciples depart and he dismissed the crowds so the setting for temptation would dissipate.

Secondly, he knew what was going to happen next in the disciples' life as well as the reality that they had many lessons yet to learn, so he no doubt dismissed them so that he might pray for them.

And thirdly, he went on the mountain by himself to pray so that he might enjoy glorious fellowship with His Father—an eternal fellowship He had enjoyed since before the world began.

There are at least three lessons we must think through and apply to our lives as followers of Jesus here.

First, Jesus took deliberate action steps to spend time in prayer. Do you make deliberate plans to pray? I read this quote from Matt Perman this week, “What you actually schedule will have more impact than what you simply intend.” How true is that? What deliberate steps do you need to take to enjoy communion with God in prayer more frequently and more consistently in the stillness?

Jesus often prayed to His Father in the season of stillness. But seasons of stillness rarely just happen in our wired world, do they? We must schedule them and make them happen—just like Jesus did.

Secondly, praying in seasons of stillness require that we seek a time and a place free from distraction. This is perhaps the most challenging aspect of praying in seasons of stillness. It is especially difficult if you are raising a family I think. But even if you live alone or you are an empty nester, praying in seasons of silence is still difficult for we love “noise”—even if it is secondary noise. I speak right now of external noise. We have to have music in the background via radio, computer, or ipods or the TV on. We are averse to periods of silence. And to extend the matter, we are so connected via cellphones, blackberries, computers, and what not that we rarely choose prolonged silence even if when we can. Furthermore, when we do have the period of stillness, say before the dawn or when the house is quiet, do we choose to do what Jesus often did—pray and commune with our Father? Why is it that we so often choose other activities, even good ones, rather than pray?

But thirdly, we learn from Jesus' prayer life that prolonged periods of praying in the stillness are possible—even in the midst of a heavy schedule. Here Jesus is in the middle of a period of intense activity. Just look at chapter 14. He teaches all day, feeds thousands, then dismisses them. Later he walks across the water, rescues the disciples, and then as soon as he is on the other side of the Sea, he is recognized by the local residents and they bring scores of sick people to him for healing.

How did Jesus find periods of prolonged silence? Not too often in the daylight hours and neither will we likely. Early in the morning and late at night are the seasons of stillness.

"And rising very early in the morning, while it was still dark, he departed and went out to a desolate place, and there he prayed." (Mark 1:35).

"But he would withdraw to desolate places and pray." (Luke 5:16).

"And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up on the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone," (Matthew 14:23).

" Now Jesus was praying in a certain place, and when he finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples.'" (Luke 11:1).

Our Master scheduled and sought after seasons of praying in the stillness. He did so frequently and consistently. So must we! When this week will you purpose to pray in your season of stillness?

We must pray in the season of storms

Next, let us consider that we must pray in the season of storms. We could look at Jesus praying in the storm of his life—in the Garden of Gethsemane, but let us stay in the context here and consider this time one of his followers praying in the storm—Peter.

"And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up on the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, but the boat by this time was a long way from the land, beaten by the waves, for the wind was against them. And in the fourth watch of the night he came to them, walking on the sea. But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, and said, "It is a ghost!" and they cried out in fear. But immediately Jesus spoke to them, saying, "Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid." And Peter answered him, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." He said, "Come." So Peter got out of the boat and walked on the water and came to Jesus. But when he saw the wind, he was afraid, and beginning to sink he cried out, "Lord, save me." Jesus immediately reached out his hand and took hold of him, saying to him, "O you of little faith, why did you doubt?" And when they got into the boat, the wind ceased. And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God.'" (Matthew 14:23-33).

There is much in this story worthy of our attention. I commend this passage to you for further rich mining of the gems contained here, but let's look at the details very briefly and then seek several principles about praying in the storm like Peter did. One has outlined the passage this way.

First, we see **Jesus' awareness of the situation**. Mark's tells us that from the mountain of prayer, Jesus "saw that they were making headway painfully" in the storm (6:48). He saw them harassed by the storm. They were going all out, straining with all their might against the gale in a battle for their lives. He knew their deep struggle.

Second, we watch **Jesus' approach** as "he came to them, walking on the sea" (v. 25). He waits awhile, it's now the fourth watch of the night (3 AM-6 AM), just before dawn, but he comes and nearly walks by the boat (Mark 6:48).

Third, we sense **the anxiety of the disciples** as they saw him and "were terrified and said, "It is a ghost!" and cried out in fear" (v. 26) They had anxiety about the sea and the storm and now about the sight of a ghost walking on the sea. They should have been focusing on Jesus' power but instead they allowed a raging storm, a dark night and their imagination to choke their hearts with anxiety. They should have remembered verses like Psalm 23:4 and 139:8-10, but the storm squeezed out the Scripture.

But then we see the Lord's **assurance** (v. 27), "But immediately Jesus spoke to them, saying, "Take heart, it is I. Do not be afraid." He gave them wise counsel, provided comfort, and steadied their confidence.

Next, we see divine **assistance** as Peter asks permission to walk on the water to Jesus (v. 29), which demonstrates great faith. Peter is sometimes faulted for his impetuosity, even here in this situation. But he was the only one in the courtyard with Jesus beside John (his denial); His suggestion to build 3 houses on Mt. of Transfiguration was prompted by sincere devotion and He genuinely wanted to serve Christ not be served when he refused to have his feet washed by Jesus. I just think Peter wanted to be as close to the Lord in the storm. As John MacArthur said, "He followed Christ so closely he probably bumped into him all the time." Jesus bids him come and we all know that Peter begins looking at peril of the storm instead of the power of the Savior and he prays, "Lord, save me!", which is the point I want to focus on and the Lord immediately rescues him and they get up into the boat and the disciples all worship Christ!

What are **some lessons** we can learn about praying in the season of storms. First, let us remember that **Jesus puts us here**. These disciples were in the storm because they were in the will of God, not out of it (like Jonah's storm). God sends storms in our lives for correction at times, but sometimes he sends them for perfection as well. Praying in the storm means we remember that God sends and controls the storms. And the truth is we are safer in the storm in God's will than if we disobey God and stay on dry land when he commands otherwise. If God sends the storm, he can will care for us.

Secondly, in praying in storms, let us remember that **Jesus is praying for us**. Warren Wiersbe asks, "If you knew that Jesus Christ was in the next room, praying for you, would it not give you new courage to endure the storm and do His will? Of course it would. He is not in the next room, but He *is* in heaven interceding for you. He sees your need, He knows your fears, and He is in control of the situation."

"Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one . . . who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us." (Romans 8:34).

"Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need." (Hebrews 4:16).

Thirdly, **He comes to us in the storm**. Sometimes we feel deserted, much like the sentiments expressed in the psalms. "Have you forgotten us, Lord? Where are you, Master? How long, O Lord?" We feel in our affliction "so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despair of life itself." In these times, we must remember sweet, faith-building promises such as "When you pass through the waters, **I will be with you**; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you." (Isaiah 43:2).

Here's a fourth principle to aid our prayer in stormy seasons: **He will help me grow in the storm**. He will never give me more than I can bear, but He will help me learn to trust Him more and more! The disciples grew in this storm. The story ends in Matthew,

"And when they got into the boat, the wind ceased. And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God.'" (Matthew 14:32-33). Did you know this is the first recorded instance of the disciples worshipping Jesus in Matthew's gospel? And it was the first time they declared with faith, "Truly you are the Son of God"? Oh, they still had a long way to grow, but every storm they endured made them stronger and the same is true of us.

A fifth principle to keep in mind during stormy seasons that call for prayer is this: **He will see you through the storm!** Jesus said, "Come" to Peter and that was His promise to see Him through. He says, "Come to me all you are weary and are burdened down with sin and I will give you rest!" When we pray, if ask anything in His Name, he hears us! He will see us through! Sometimes he waits much longer than we expect when we ask Him to come, as in the story of Lazarus' illness and death. Jesus could have answered that request much sooner, but he didn't. He could have prevented the death of Lazarus with a word; he could have prevented this storm with a word just as easily. Abraham had to wait for a long time for the answered prayer of a son and Paul endured the storm of his thorn in the flesh till the day he died. But when help is urgently needed and you are about to drown in the storm, the Lord can answer immediately and stretch out his hand of salvation.

As one man has written, "There is no state in which Christ cannot save us and there is no storm in which Christ will not save His children." And another preached, "We will never find ourselves in a place where Christ cannot find us; and no storm is so severe that He cannot deliver us."

I have never been in a storm on the water. A few years ago my son and I went fishing on a boat with a brother in Christ and as we were going out onto Lake Erie it didn't look to promising. We didn't get out very far and Jeff sized up the situation and quickly and wisely turned around after a few minutes and got safely back to shore. That was in about 3 foot waves and in broad daylight. So that doesn't come close to a storm for me.

I have driven however in pretty bad storms—some pretty bad snowstorms. A few years ago we had to pick up some of Ian's friends from Cleveland Hopkins airport. It was bad going there, but wow, on the way home, I thought for sure we were not going to make it. I am surprised that the steering wheel actually stayed attached to the car when I got home because my fingers had been wrapped around it so tightly for a few hours.

But most of our storms don't happen on water or in a car, do they? They happen at the job you were so excited about that hasn't turned out as great as you thought. They develop in marriages that seem "made in heaven" but the unrealistic expectations have soured it. Storms happen in churches that turn out to have many of the same flaws as other churches you've attended, in the new home that you couldn't wait to get into and now find has some issues, with that new friend that was so much like you—including having weaknesses, flaws, and quirks just like you. At the beginning of a new year or a new decade, life might look as good as those **wrinkle-free khakis** you bought which now have of all things—wrinkles!

In times like this, prayer is the right response. Sometimes even the simplest of prayers, "Lord, save me!" If you are entering 2010 in the middle of a storm, you will probably encounter one or two along the way this year. What to do? Stop looking at the storm and keep your eyes glued on the Savior. That's hard to do. We need God's wisdom and His power! We need to remember His sovereignty and His presence!

Conclusion

How is God speaking through His Word today regarding your prayer life? Where is He calling you to radical obedience in prayer? Oh, the power of a praying life?

- What deliberate action steps do you need to take to pray in some still periods consistently and frequently?
- Do you have a time and a place where you can be free from distractions to pray? If not, what will it take to get there?
- Have a busy life? Jesus was not too busy to pray. In fact, he was too busy not to pray? Are you really an exception?
- How are you handling your latest or ongoing storm? Do recognize the maturing ministry of this stormy season in your life? Are you remembering that Jesus is praying for you? That he is meeting you in this storm? How's he growing you in the storm? Have you forgotten that He is there to see you through it?

As we come to the communion table—a table that reflects symbolically our union with Christ and with His church—I want us take some time to pray silently. You aren't alone (are some of us ever it seems?), but we can practice some solitude and silence and commune with God just for a few minutes. We won't play any background music or give you any prayer requests. I just want you to commune with your Father. If you don't know Christ yet, it would be a great time to cry out to Him to save you from your sin and say, "Lord, be merciful to me a sinner! Lord, I believe but help my unbelief."

If you are going through a major or several minor storms in your life, spend this time calling out to the Master, "Lord, don't you care that I am in the storm? And then reaffirm some of the truths we have learned today about coming to Christ in the storm. I would also encourage you to seek out one or two Christian friends after the service and pray together this week about these storms.

Finally, as we fix our thoughts on Jesus in prayer and then around the Table, will you please remember that in the final hours of his life, he experienced both stillness and storms. As he faced the storm of bearing the sins of His people, He sought solitude with His Father in the garden with a few friends but ended up on His face before God alone saying, "If this cup could pass from me, if there is any other way, Father, please. But not my will, but Yours be done!" In his final hours, there was not only stillness, but there was the storm of enduring the wrath of God against sin—not His but the sin of those for whom He died! He faced hurt, confusion, alienation, injustice aloneness, misunderstanding, anger and He did so without sin! He was forsaken of the Father, so you and I would never be forsaken of God! Through it all, He prayed!

He is our great example in praying in the seasons of stillness as well as in life's storm. Peter, on the other hand, failed to really pray in the stillness as Christ began to experience His agony in the Garden. This in part may explain his failure to weather the storm well of Christ's arrest and crucifixion. We won't weather the storm well if we fail to pray in the stillness. So seize the still times to be better equipped for the storms.

But praise God, also remember as you pray that just as Jesus was praying for the disciples in the literal storm on the sea, he also prays for us in the various storms of life we encounter. For what Jesus said to Peter is true of his relationship with every believer: " "Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned again, strengthen your brothers." (Luke 22:31-32).

May this be a year that we experience the reality of Christ's praying for us as well as a year where we learn to pray in the stillness and in the storms of life !