



Vol. 51.

JANUARY, 1879.

No. 1.

CHRIST STILLING THE TEMPEST.

A SERMON

*Preached on behalf of the American Seamen's Friend Society at the
First Presbyterian Church of Edgewater, Staten Island, N. Y.,*

BY THE REV. J. E. ROCKWELL, D. D.

MATTHEW, viii: 23-27.—“ And when he was entered into a ship his disciples followed him. And behold there arose a great tempest in the sea, insomuch that the ship was covered with waves: but he was asleep. And his disciples came to him and awoke him, saying, Lord save us we perish.—And he saith unto them, why are ye fearful, O ye of little faith. Then he arose and rebuked the winds and the sea and there was a great calm. But the men marvelled saying, what manner of man is this that even the winds and the sea obey him ? ”

With what a wonderful interest is that sea invested whose waters so often bore upon their bosom the Son of God,—and whose shores witnessed so many of his mighty works! Next to Jerusalem where the great scene of his sufferings and death was enacted, we can think of no spot which is so precious in its memories—so pregnant in its associations with the words and works of Christ as is that beautiful lake where he selected some of his noblest apostles—uttered some of his sublimest instructions—and performed many of his mightiest miracles. It is nearly thirteen miles long by seven miles in its broadest part, or very nearly the dimensions of this our island home. The description which has been given of it by the author of the “ Land and the Book ” will present

us with a distinct conception of its appearance and will prepare us to contemplate the act of omnipotent power which is set before us in the text.

“The lake is about six hundred feet lower than the Mediterranean and this great depression accounts for some of its remarkable phenomena. Seen from any point of the surrounding heights, it is a burnished mirror set in a framework of rounded hills and rugged mountains which rise and roll backward and upward to where hoary Hermon hangs the picture against the vault of Heaven. My experience in this region enables me to sympathize with the disciples in their long night's contest with the winds. The sun had scarcely set when the wind began to rush down toward the lake, and it continued all night long with constantly increasing violence, so that when we reached the shore next morning, the face of the lake was like a huge boiling caldron. The wind howled down every way from the north-east and east with such fury that no efforts of rowers could have brought a boat to shore at any point along the coast. To understand the causes of these sudden and violent tempests we must remember that the lake lies low—six hundred feet lower than the ocean—that the water courses have cut out profound ravines and wild gorges converging to the head of the lake and these last like gigantic funnels draw down the cold winds from the mountains. And moreover these winds are not only violent, but they come down suddenly, and often when the sky is perfectly clear.”

This authentic description of Tiberias will prepare us at once to enter upon the consideration of this miracle before us.

At the close of a day of exhausting labor our Savior entered with his disciples into a ship for the purpose of passing over to the other side of the lake. As the multitudes who had been listening to his instructions and witnessing his gracious and loving work of divine power were turning away to their homes and to rest, the hardy men whom Christ had chosen to be his disciples launched forth upon the now peaceful waters, and hoisting their sail turned towards the wild shores of Gadara, where our Savior knew that a wretched victim of demoniacal possession was requiring his almighty aid. It is possible that the disciples when they received their sailing orders from him whose word was law, may have wondered at the command. Those old sailors long accustomed to watching every indication of the weather may have detected already the presages of a coming storm. But we hear of no objections made to the command which bade them launch forth into the deep. They had learned the lesson of obedience to their Captain, which every sailor knows is essential to his safety and success. They were assured that Christ was allwise and they did not hesitate to follow him. And oh,

that all his professed disciples could learn this lesson of simple and unquestioning obedience. Many there are who are willing to follow the Master if they can be assured that all will be fair and smooth and pleasant—but they hesitate as to obedience when they fear there may be dangers, storms to be encountered, conflicts to be endured, and self to be denied. The true disciple of Christ is a soldier, enlisted for life—who must expect to follow his leader not alone on parade days and when he is surrounded by crowds of admiring spectators,—but down to the tented field, to the night march long and weary, and to the hard fought battles with foes wary, malignant and powerful. The disciple of Christ is a mariner, and when his Captain bids him launch forth upon the deep he must obey, even though the storm lowers and the winds howl around him.

Our Savior does not attempt to conceal from all who would enter his service that they must expect to encounter perils and hardships. He tells them that in this world they must have tribulation, and bids them sit down, count the cost, and see whether they are ready to follow him where he leads them, to reflect seriously upon the perils and toils they must encounter, and when they have decided fully to serve him, to render full and cheerful obedience to his commands without a murmur or misgiving. We may see illustrations of this truth if we follow the disciples through the vicissitudes of the memorable night set before us in the text, and may derive therefrom some lessons of great practical value.

I. We find them soon after they have set sail encountering a fierce and dangerous storm. The presence of Christ with his people does not exempt them from trials. The disciples find that even while the Master is in the ship with them the sea becomes boisterous under the power of the gale that sweeps down from the mountains. Night spreads its dark mantle over them and leaves them to battle with the elements as many a poor sailor has since done through many hours and watches, and amid horrors and anxieties of which the landsman can have no conception, and which no pen can fully describe. Their vessel was not the proud and stately structure of modern times, which with the tireless motions of its giant arms breasts the waves and stems the currents and winds of the ocean, but a frail fisher's boat with a single square sail suspended from the top of the mast, and suited only to the quiet waters in which a fisherman usually plies his vocation. Yet at this time it was compelled to encounter a fierce storm not upon a broad sea where there was room to scud before the gale, but upon a lake hemmed in by mountains and bounded by a shore more dangerous than the ocean itself. There the disciples toiled during the many hours of

that fearful night until all hope in any human help utterly failed them. The ship had evidently become unmanageable, for it was covered with the waves, the rudder must have been useless to keep the struggling vessel in such a position as to prevent the sea from making a clean breach over her, and when in this position the hardy and practised sailors of Galilee knew that human help was of no avail. In that frail and open vessel now lying at the mercy of the waves and fast filling with water, they felt that their hours must soon be numbered. Amid that war of elements, with the winds howling their death shriek above them, with the sea yawning beneath them, with darkness around them, with broken mast and rent sail and a rudderless bark drifting away to destruction, they felt, as many a sailor has since done, that human skill was useless and human power weakness, and that unless aid came to them from him who made the sea, and who commandeth the winds and the waves they must perish.

II. And this leads us to notice their application to Christ for his aid.

The scene as presented to us by the evangelists is full of striking dramatic interest as well as spiritual instruction. The crew long accustomed to such wild scenes and perhaps often out at night upon a stormy sea had now evidently abandoned their posts of duty when they saw the vessel a helpless wreck fast filling with water. You may be sure all hope is gone when you see a sailor leaving his station amid a storm and resigning his ship to her fate. Those men now pale with fear and worn with labor and watching, bethink themselves of one only hope. The Master is with them in the ship and they approach him in their peril with their prayer for his divine assistance.

Come with them ye who are in trouble. Approach, ye who would look upon the face of innocence, or gaze upon him who in all his human nature is in full sympathy with our poor suffering race. Draw near, ye who would behold the divine glory as it shines in the face of Jesus Christ. Though the storm is wildly howling around, you find here the Savior not wan and pale with terror, but calmly asleep upon a pillow on one of the cushions of the rowers. Fatigued with the work of the past day, He who had been caring for the sick, or preaching to the multitudes that gathered around him at the sea shore, is now lying in the unconsciousness of slumber amid the wild tumults of that dark, stormy night.

Their Master and ours had all our sinless attributes and infirmities, for he was of woman born, though he was also the Son of God. And we love to think of him as man, as one who knoweth our frame, who remembereth in all our weariness, cares and imperfections that we are

but dust, who looks upon the poor toiling laborer and remembers his own poverty and toils, who sees the homeless wanderer and sympathizes with him because he once had not where to lay his head, who sees the tempest tossed sailor hanging out at night amidst storm and darkness upon the quivering mast, and remembers Tiberias and its raging waves; and who can thus have a blessed sympathy for man which nothing but his own experiences and history could give him. Oh what a blessed truth is it, "that we have not an High Priest who cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities, but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin."

But in that human form dwelleth the fullness of the Godhead bodily. That worn and weary, sleeping Jesus was also God manifest in the flesh, and to him as such the disciples in their fear, and with a faith feeble and imperfect, yet living and real, approached with their prayer for aid. And we notice,

1st. That they recognized him as one who was an all-sufficient Savior. They knew full well that prayer could only be offered to God, and they called him Lord, and approached him as one who was able to save. And it is thus that we are taught to approach our blessed Redeemer. While the mightiest archangel would turn away from the prayer of the humblest sinner, if addressed to him, as an act of idolatry, Christ never hesitated to receive the worship of all who came to him, or to hear the prayers and praises of those who stood in need of or had received his divine assistance. While as man he prayed to the Father, and often found occasion to retire and seek his aid, as God himself in all his sublime majesty and glory, he listened to the supplications of the suffering and gave them answers of mercy and power. Thus the disciples approached him and they came believing that he was able to save.

2nd. And in this connection we notice again that they gave up all hopes of being saved except by his divine interposition. They felt that human help was vain. They had struggled and toiled until, despite all their efforts, the ship was sinking. They knew that man could not save them. And they cried, Save Lord, we perish. And how often does God leave us to fall into straits and exigencies where we are compelled to abandon all hope in ourselves, and so are led to look away to him who is almighty. Often he dries our broken cisterns, that we may be led to the fountain of living waters. He teaches by processes that are sad and painful, our own utter helplessness, that we may come to him in whose salvation alone he is found. The experience of every sinner that is saved by grace, in some way has taught him this lesson. His struggles with doubts and fears and temptations are often like the storm upon Gennessaret, and lead him to cry in his extremity,

Save Lord, or I perish. He feels that unless Christ aids him, he must be lost. And so God often finds it necessary to discipline his church, and communities and nations as well as individuals, until in their calamities and trials they shall cease to lean upon an arm of flesh and look to God alone for salvation. He will have all the glory. He will share it with no mortal. He often permits the world to see that human wisdom is folly, and human power weakness, that men may learn that God alone is great and wise, and that the Most High ruleth among the children of men.

3rd. We notice again in the prayer of the disciples an humble deference to the divine will. Their petition simply was, save Lord, or we perish. How salvation was to come they did not attempt to indicate. They did not direct him to adjust the disjointed rudder, or mend the tattered sail, or bale the sinking ship, or stop its open seams, or replace its broken mast. They felt that the foolishness of God was wiser than men, and that the weakness of God was stronger than men, and they were willing to leave the methods of salvation in his hands, not even caring to ask how he was to save them. And this humility and deference to the divine will is an essential element in all acceptable prayer. It is solemn mockery to attempt to direct Jehovah how to bring about the ends for which we pray. And yet how often do men seem to mark out the way in which they expect the blessings they seek to come. I have sometimes thought when I have heard the prayers of Christians for the removal of some impending evil, or the bestowment of some desired good, that they were trying to shew their Creator how easily the end might be accomplished if he would but adopt their plan, and that the church or the nation could only be saved by the means which they pointed out. Ah my friends, we must be willing that Christ should save us in his own methods and for his own glory. Our only plea is mercy, our only prayer must be save Lord, or we perish. Then we must come as lost sinners. Our only petition must be for salvation either for ourselves or for our country. We must leave the methods the means and the purposes to be accomplished with him who ruleth for his own glory.

4th. Thus the disciples came, and their prayer was answered. Christ arose and rebuked the winds and the waves when he had first gently chided the trembling sailors for their unbelief. He arose in his divine majesty, and the elements recognized in him their Master. The winds heard his voice and crept back hushed and breathless to their hiding places among the hills. The waves heard him in their wild commotion and sank obedient at his feet. No wonder the men marvelled, and asked "what manner of man is this?" Who among them could doubt, who could hesitate longer as to the divine nature of him

whom even the winds and the seas obeyed? Who would like Thomas falling at his feet exclaim, with rapture and love,—My Lord and my God?

And now gathering up these thoughts and lessons, what remains but that I set before you the privilege and the duty of going to Christ as one who is willing and able to save. Tossed upon the billows of life, weary and worn with the struggles which are incident to your experience of its storms and vicissitudes would that all of you who hear me to-day might have full and free access to Christ, and were ever ready to apply to him in the power of a faith that took fast hold of his promises, and with a prayer that was an humble but earnest and importunate plea for salvation. Oh my hearers, Christ is suited to you in every exigency of life. Are you suffering the stings of an awakened conscience, are you wrestling with fears, doubts and temptations? Go to Christ, for he can bring you deliverance. He will wash you in his atoning blood, he will throw over you the robe of his finished righteousness, he will save you from wrath to come, he will make you an heir of heaven. Are you surrounded by adversity and threatening calamities, are the clouds of affliction and sorrow brooding heavily around you, and threatening to sweep away all your hopes and joys? Go to Christ and utter in his ear the cry for help. Never shall you go away unblessed, in his own way and time he will deliver and comfort you. Are you tossed upon a dark and cheerless ocean, with the masts gone, with the lights extinguished, and your bark foundering among the billows, still fear not for Christ is able to save. His words to you are, "Call upon me in the day of trouble and I will deliver thee, and thou shalt glorify me." Go to him for mercy, and your tears shall be turned into smiles, your prayers into songs of praise, the burthen of which shall be—"Not unto us, but unto thy name be all the glory."

Yea even when the last storm of life shall beat upon you, and death shall approach you drear, dark and inexorable, Christ shall be with you, his grace will sustain you, his rod and staff shall comfort you, his voice shall be heard above the roar of the elements saying, "Fear not for I am with thee," and so upheld by his grace and mercy you shall float away into a safe and quiet haven, and find every storm hushed, every trial over, and heaven with all its holiness, peace and joy your eternal and blessed portion.

And has not the theme we have presented and the scene upon which we have dwelt an especial interest when we think of the men of the sea who do business upon the great waters, and who from the very nature of their employments are largely cut off from the ordinary influences and associations of the sanctuary and its ordinances, and yet

who especially need the presence and sympathy and help of that Divine Savior on whose ears fell the words, "Lord save us, we perish." Was there not a significance in his choice of four of the hardy seamen of Galilee to be his apostles, which should be considered by the church in her efforts to spread abroad the everlasting Gospel? And has not the blessing which has followed the efforts to bring sailors within the hallowed influences of religion proved abundantly the propriety and importance of those special efforts which have been made in their behalf?

It is to bring before the sailor the truths of the Gospel, to set forth to his faith and affections the Savior who once pressed a sailor's pillow, and who knows his wants and temptations and trials, that the AMERICAN SEAMEN'S FRIEND SOCIETY asks aid from the churches to carry on its work. Fifty years of successful labor have proved the special need of such an institution and its peculiar adaptation to meet the wants of three millions of men who go down to the sea in ships. Its Chaplaincies, its Homes, and the Libraries, are the means by which it reaches them. To keep these agencies in action and healthful operation, requires the generous aid of those who are the stewards of God's bounty, and who are to use the means which he places at their disposal in such methods as shall but advance the interests of his cause and kingdom. Who is there that does not owe a debt to seamen? Where is the community, however distant it may be from the ocean, that has not an interest in the men who are engaged in a seafaring life? They defend our nation's life and honor. They carry to other lands the products of our soil and the fruits of our industry, and they bring back to us the luxuries of every clime. They go forth upon a restless ocean and encounter its storms and brave its perils and dangers. And they often find their graves beneath its waters. What less can we do for them than to provide them with such instructions, and to surround them by such influences, as that shall open to them the knowledge of Christ as a Savior? We may best do this through the Society that claims to be the Seamen's Friend, which already has measured out a half century of labor, whose results are marked by abundant tokens of the divine blessing.

This Society asks for the sympathy and prayers and earnest support of all who love our common Savior, and who know the preciousness and power of his grace. It seeks to lead the sailor to him who is mighty to save, and whose voice even the winds and the sea obey. Will you help it in its work and supply it with the means of placing on every ship a Library, and in every port a Home and a Chapel where the sailor may be surrounded with the influences and blessings of the Gospel?