

Surviving the Storms

Acts 27

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“We put to sea,” Luke writes. These are strange words to the attentive reader of Scripture. The Bible, as full as it is of epic adventures and intriguing tales, talks little of the sea. Outside this book of Acts, few among the Biblical cast venture into the open waters. Noah’s story is a sea-faring one, of sorts. And then there is Jonah, famously swallowed by a whale as he escapes by sea from his prophetic calling. Several of Jesus’ disciples were fishermen on the small Sea of Galilee, and that group often rowed across the water from one shore to another. But the Sea of Galilee, dangerous though its storms could be, is hardly the open ocean.

In the Jewish imagination, the sea was a place of chaos and uncertainty. Before the creation of the earth in Genesis 1 there existed only the watery abyss known as “the deep,” a place of darkness, emptiness, and disorder. There is sense, even in the creation story, of God’s sovereignty over the seas; they know their limits because God has gathered them into one place, surrounded by dry land. (See also Psalm 104:5-9.) Nonetheless, to the Jewish mind the seas remain unruly, threatening, and chaotic, symbolizing human vulnerability and divine judgment. It is no wonder that the ancient Israelites were not sea-faring people and that the Bible has few tales of swashbuckling pirates or heroic sailors. The best future Israel could hope for was just the one that John of Patmos imagined, a new heavens and a new earth where “the sea is no more” (Revelation 21:1).

We see in today’s reading just why the sea was so threatening. The apostle Paul has been arrested by the Roman authorities for his work promoting the Way of Jesus. As a Roman citizen, he is afforded certain rights, so he has appealed to the emperor and will be given a hearing across the sea in Rome (Acts 25). Paul boards the ship in Palestine in chains, though he is accompanied by at least two companions – possibly his doctor, Luke, and an assistant. “We put to sea,” Luke writes, and almost immediately the journey becomes difficult. With the winds working against their sailing ship, they hop from inlet to island around the coast of modern Turkey, finally reaching a backwater harbor on Crete after the Fast of the Atonement, usually in late September or early October. The ideal months for sailing across the open sea have already passed.

Paul recommends to his guard that they winter here in this small port, otherwise not only the cargo will be lost, but also their very lives. It should come as no surprise that the ship’s captain

does not want to take orders from a prisoner. Not wanting to spend the winter in this backwater and feeling a fair southern breeze, he elects to sail the ship further around the island to a better port where they can winter more comfortably. But no sooner than they leave port than the winds change and a big nor'easter pushes the ship out into the open seas. They cannot fight the powerful winds, and so they are driven beyond the sight of land. For fourteen days, clouds obscure the sky so they cannot navigate by the stars. Between sea-sickness and anxiety, the crew cannot bear to eat. The ship is so battered by the waves that they must undergird it with straps to keep it from falling apart. To help it ride higher in the water, they first dump the cargo, then all the extra riggings. Finally, Luke says, they even dumped their hope of survival.

You do not have to be an earth-bound ancient Israelite to appreciate the symbolism inherent in seas and storms. There are all sorts of storms that batter us in our personal lives. There are those here today who face a storm because of serious illness in yourselves or a close loved one. There are members among us who have battled the storms of addiction, sometimes finding calm waters and other times getting tossed about. I know there are some whose marriages or families seem to be coming apart and you are searching desperately for the straps to undergird the ship and hold it together. Some face financial crisis, have given up hope of returning to stability and prosperity, and live in a constant state of uncertainty.

We also face storms in our communities that threaten to tear us apart and leave us all for dead. I am grieved deeply by the storms that are battering the ship of the church in these recent years. We are rocked by the waves of same-gender marriage and the church's witness on a variety of political and social issues. Driving the waters are the winds of more significant disagreement – issues like how we read and understand the Bible and the very nature of the church itself. They are felt like a great nor'easter, driving our church beyond the sight of what is safe and familiar and clouding our ability to navigate in the world today. Since the first century, the church has thought of itself as a boat, protecting its followers from the storms of the world. But today, it can feel like the boat is adrift, taking on water, and coming apart at the seams. Is there any hope for it, or for us?

Many of our favorite Scripture verses about storms come from the gospels where Jesus is frequently seen calming the storms that threaten the lives of the disciples (Matthew 8:23-27; Mark 4:35-41; Luke 8:22-25). But in Acts, we see no divine intervention to bring the storm to an early end. Instead of calming the storm, God sends a sea-sick Paul this message: “Do not be afraid. I have a purpose for you. The ship may be destroyed, but you and everyone aboard will survive the storm.”

Perhaps we like the Jesus stories better. We prefer a God who will intervene with magnificent power to bring peace to our storms. We want a God of miraculous healing. We want our spouses or siblings or children to suddenly understand us without us actually having to change. We want

to win the lottery. We would like to God to pronounce that “our side” is right in whatever political and theological debate is raging. Sometimes we encounter that God. Many of you can tell stories of miraculous restoration. Other times though, we must hear the word spoken to Paul and his shipmates: Do not be afraid. I have a purpose for you. The ship may be destroyed, but you and everyone aboard will survive the storm.”

We see at the end of the story that Paul and the crew do in fact survive, some only by floating toward an island clinging to planks of wood. But they do not make it without more intervention from Paul. The crew seems unconvinced at first when Paul first encourages them with his word from God. No one responds to Paul as they continue their two-week drift through the stormy sea. In fact, it seems that some thought it better not to trust Paul and to secure their own fate. Under the guise of letting down more anchors from the bow, some of the crew began to lower the lifeboats so they could find their own way to safe harbor. Paul impresses upon his guard to intervene. The crew needs to stay together on the ship – for their own safety and that of every person on board. Somehow convinced by this guard, the soldiers cut away the lifeboat before the sailors can pile in and take off.

This crew is really in it now. Storms are still raging, the lifeboats are gone, and no one knows where they are. Paul gathers the crew: sailors, soldiers, prison guards, and prisoners together and insists that they share a meal. Maybe some thought it would be their last supper. Paul seems to know that it is the Lord’s supper they share. He uses the four-fold formula that is so familiar to Christian ears: he took bread, gave thanks to God for it, broke it, and began to eat. Then, the Scripture says, all 276 souls on board were encouraged.

In our personal storms and in the storms we face as a community of faith, we do well if we follow the model of Paul and his fellow travelers. We are wise to seek the counsel of those outside our inner circle. Sometimes the most unlikely people can offer us the wisdom and encouragement we need to survive the storm. Paul is a prisoner and only a novice waterman. He is hardly someone a ship’s captain might seek out, much less receive his unsolicited advice. But Paul is the one with the wisdom to stay at the first harbor for winter, and Paul is the one tuned in to the divine word to take courage, remember the purpose, and stick together. Who are those in your own life who might help you see the truth or direct you to God’s wisdom? Perhaps they are unlikely advisors or seem too lowly to offer any real help. Who are those people on the edges of our community of faith that might bring clarity to God’s purpose and intent for us? The youth? The poor? Personally and corporately, let us seek these people out and listen to the word God has spoken to them.

We also do well to remember Paul’s instructions to stick together. When storms are raging around us, we are so tempted to go it alone. We see what looks like an easier way out, and we take it. Or else we try to pretend that the storm is not so bad and we can make it on our own.

Paul's instructions are clear: don't do it. We are all better off if we stay together in the ship. We will need one another to make our final approach to safety. Every hand will have to be on deck to steer the ship into harbor. When it does break apart, those who cannot swim will need the swimmers to guide them safely to the beach. In your individual storms, please think of this community of faith as your shipmates. Do not stop coming to church because you are embarrassed about the struggles in your life. Stay in community so that we can all help each other survive the storms. And if you can swim, reach out a hand to someone who feels like they are drowning. And in our communal life, we too will stay with our brothers and sisters in Christ. We cannot take an easy exit when we face disagreements about the future of the church. The proclamation of the gospel is best served when we stick together, even if the ship breaks apart around us.

Finally, we must do as Paul did with the motley crew of soldiers, sailors, prison guards, and prisoners: we must break bread together. The meals that we share are not only food for our bodies, they are food for our souls. There is some power in a shared meal that binds us together. If you've ever been sick or lonely or depressed, and someone has brought you dinner and sat with you to eat, you know the power of a shared meal. Every Friday in Washington Street Park a group of Christians from various churches in downtown Beaufort gather not only to serve their neighbors but to eat with them. Our table fellowship sustains the community that is essential for our survival. Our table fellowship allows us to invite and listen to those on the edges, the unlikely advisors. In the church, this meal that we celebrate today is the sign and the substance of our commitment not only to Christ but also to one another. As you hear Jack proclaim that Christ "took bread, gave thanks to God for it, broke it, and shared it with his disciples," may you take courage; may you remember that God has a purpose for you; and may you cast your lot in with this motley crew of disciples who are your only hope for survival. When you come to the table, you are not only meeting Christ, you are meeting and claiming your commitment to each brother and sister who also comes to eat, to be encouraged, and cast his or her lot in with you.

The storms are raging within and without, personally and communally. But we are in this together and we need to hear the words of God's messenger saying: "Do not be afraid. I have a purpose for each of you and all of you. The ship may break apart, but you will survive the storm." So take courage, listen to unexpected wisdom, stay in community, and break bread together. We will survive.

May it be so. Amen.