

VOYAGE THROUGH A RAGING STORM

Acts 27:1-8, 9-26

The sermon this morning is a continuation of a sermon series entitled, “Navigating the Storm—How to Journey in Faith through Troubling Times.” Today we are looking at the most extensive and harrowing story in the Bible about someone on a ship on the sea navigating a storm—the story of Paul on his journey to Rome. It is a story with important messages for our own lives. Let us begin with a moment of prayer.

Paul was on a ship bound for Rome. He was a prisoner on the ship, as he was to face trial in Rome on account of his missionary activities. We heard how he sailed from Jerusalem to a port on the coast of present-day Turkey, where he was placed onto another ship bound for Rome. *[There the centurion found an Alexandrian ship bound for Italy. Acts 27:6]* This was an Egyptian grain ship—the largest type of commercial ship sailing on the Mediterranean at that time—carrying a cargo of wheat. A ship like this would also carry passengers. The passengers on this ship included a group of prisoners, among them Paul, a squadron of soldiers guarding the prisoners, a crew of sailors, and some other travelers, among them Luke, the writer of the book of Acts.

The ship, as we heard, had a rough time sailing, making slow progress with unfavorable winds, and managed finally to make it to Fair Havens, a harbor on the southern coast of Crete. *[Sailing with difficulty, we came to Fair Havens. Acts 27:8]* By this point, our passage said, it was already past Yom Kippur, which is in September or October, which means it was getting into late fall, a dangerous time for sailing in the open waters of the Mediterranean. *[Much time had been lost and sailing was now dangerous, because even the Fast had already gone by. Acts 27:9]* Our passage reported that Paul addressed the crew saying, “Sirs, I can see that our voyage will be with danger and much heavy loss, not only of the cargo, and the ship, but also of our lives.” *[Acts 27:10]* He recommended remaining at Fair Havens. But the people operating the ship were not inclined to listen to this prisoner. They decide to make a run for Phoenix, a harbor further on westward in Crete, which would be a nicer place to spend the winter, and a better launch point for taking their valuable cargo on to Rome. In fact, if the weather held, they could have managed to still sail to Rome. Late fall deliveries of wheat in Rome brought a very nice price. Profit considerations likely played a part in the calculation here.

Our passage reported that “when a moderate south wind began to blow, they thought they could achieve their purpose, so they weighed anchor and began to sail past Crete, close to the shore.” *[Acts 27:13]* The voyage from Fair Havens to Phoenix should have taken about four hours. But suddenly they were hit by a northeaster, not uncommon at this time of year, a strong wind blasting off the mountains of Crete which rapidly blew them out into a raging sea. *[Soon a violent wind, called the northeaster, rushed down from Crete. Acts 27:14]* I’m reminded of the Gilligan’s Island scenario, where what is supposed to be a nice little day trip turns into quite an adventure. In the case of Paul, the situation became extreme. The passage we heard described several emergency measures that the

crew took across several days and finally concluded, “When neither sun nor stars appeared for many days [making navigation impossible] and no small tempest raged, all hope of our being saved was at last abandoned.” [Acts 27:20]

At this point, Paul made a speech, in which he said, “Men, you should have listened to me and not have set sail from Crete.” [Acts 27:21] I’m not sure how popular that statement was; but at any rate it was clear at this juncture that maybe they ought to start listening to Paul. He continued,

“I urge you now to keep up your courage, for there will be no loss of life among you, but only of the ship. For last night there stood by me an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I worship, and he said, ‘Do not be afraid, Paul, you must stand before the emperor, and indeed, God has granted safety to all those who are sailing with you.’ So keep up your courage, men, for I have faith in God that it will be exactly as I have been told. But we will have to run aground on some island.” [Acts 27:22-26]

A few weeks ago we heard the story of the disciples caught in a storm on the sea of Galilee. The message that Jesus gave to them is now echoed in the message proclaimed by Paul on the ship: do not be afraid—have faith, for God is with us and will bring us through the storm. It is a message that we each need to hear when we find ourselves in a storm in life. This does not mean, however, that the answer will be instantaneous or easy. Paul concluded by saying, “we will have to run aground on some island,” which indicates there would be some rough sailing ahead. We hear the rest of the story by picking up from where we left off in verse 27.

When the fourteenth night had come, as we were drifting across the sea of Adria [this is what they called the middle of the Mediterranean sea] about midnight the sailors suspected that they were nearing land. So they took soundings and found twenty fathoms, a little farther on, they took soundings again and found fifteen fathoms. Fearing that we might run on the rocks, they let down four anchors from the stern and prayed for day to come. But when the sailors tried to escape from the ship and had lowered the boat into the sea, on the pretext of putting out anchors from the bow, Paul said to the centurion and the soldiers, “Unless these men stay in the ship, you cannot be saved.” Then the soldiers cut away the ropes of the boat and set it adrift. [Acts 27:27-32]

They had a small boat with the ship that could be used to go ashore or to go from one ship to another; here the sailors attempted to use it to escape the ship, so that they might make safely for the beach, while everyone else on the ship could perish. Paul, with divinely inspired insight, perceived and foiled the sailors’ plot. The story continues:

Just before daybreak, Paul urged all of them to take some food, saying, “Today is the fourteenth day that you have been in suspense and remaining without food, having eaten nothing. Therefore I urge you to take some food, for it will help you survive, for none of you will lose a hair from your heads.” After he had said this, he took bread, and giving thanks to God in the presence of all, he broke and it and began to eat. Then all of them

were encouraged and took food for themselves. We were in all two hundred seventy-six persons in the ship. [Acts 27:33-37] For the first time you get a picture of just how many people were involved in this voyage.

You might wonder, Why had they not eaten anything for fourteen days, when there was clearly food on board? After all, they were carrying a cargo of wheat. But imagine what it was like being tossed around on an ancient sailboat on huge waves in the Mediterranean; and they had no seasickness pills. But now, with land approaching, Paul encouraged them to fortify themselves for what lay ahead. The story continues:

“After they had satisfied their hunger, they lightened the ship by throwing the wheat into the sea.” [Acts 27:38] There goes the ship owner’s profit. They had earlier tossed other items of cargo overboard, to enable the ship to ride a bit higher in the water, but now finally they tossed over the entire precious wheat cargo, because they knew they were approaching shallow waters, and they had to get the ship riding as high as possible in order to clear enough ground as possible so that they might be able land on the beach. It did not work, though; the story continues:

In the morning they did not recognize the land, but they noticed a bay with a beach, on which they planned to run the ship ashore, if they could. So they cast off the anchors, and left them in the sea. At the same time they loosened the ropes that tied the steering-oars; then hoisting the foresail to the wind, they made for the beach. [Acts 27:39-40]

You can see why they needed those sailors to remain on the ship, to carry out the complex maneuvers necessary to bring the boat to land. Even then, it would not be easy, as the story reports:

But striking a reef, they ran the ship aground; the bow stuck and remained immovable; but the stern was being broken up by the force of the waves. [Acts 27:41] Nothing goes smooth on this voyage, and it gets worse: “The soldiers’ plan was to kill the prisoners, so that none might swim away and escape.” [Acts 27:42] According to Roman law, the soldiers could be held personally responsible if prisoners escaped, so here the soldiers aimed to protect themselves by just slaughtering the prisoners.

But—the story continues—“the centurion, wanting to save Paul, kept them from carrying out their plan. He ordered those who could swim to jump overboard first and make for the land, and the rest to follow, some on planks and others on pieces of the ship. And so it was that all were brought safely to land.” [Acts 27:43-44]

Here God works through the good heart of a Roman centurion, and in the end they all survive. It will turn out that they had arrived on the island of Malta—a small speck in a vast sea.

In its entirety, Acts chapter 27 recounts a most dramatic ancient sea voyage. Scholars have examined every detail of this account, looking at the actions of the crew, calculating the likely speed of the ship and direction and the passage of time, and they have found that everything in this account corresponds precisely to what we know about

ancient sea travel and how a ship in these conditions would have responded and where it would have moved. But the story is not in the book of Acts just to give us an exciting historical tale. It tells us a great deal about faith and how we can safely navigate the storms of life.

As we have noted in this series, the storm has long been an image for the troubles that we face in life. We may find ourselves often on stormy seas, and if we do, there are a number of aspects of Paul's voyage that very likely correspond with our own experience. For us as for Paul, the journey may be convoluted, with all kinds of twists and turns; and our journey may be fraught with uncertainties and perils, featuring one difficulty after another, with sometimes little sign of hope.

But for Paul, the journey comes finally to a good ending; indeed it is nothing short of miraculous. What are the odds that after weeks of being blown about in a tempest, without navigation, these sea travelers would suddenly find themselves washing ashore on the one speck of ground that rises up out of thousands of square miles of open sea? Yet they just happen to float up toward a beach on Malta. It is hard to miss the hand of God at work in this story.

In all this the story is a powerful illustration of how God works and what it means for us to have faith. Indeed if we look closely at the faith of Paul in contrast to the attitude of others on the ship, we can see three hallmarks of the sort of faith that can carry each of us through a storm.

The first key principle of faith illustrated in the story is: Listen to God instead of your fears. We saw how, as the storm worsened,, people on the ship fell more and more into fear and despair, until at one point, Luke reports, "all hope of their being saved was abandoned." [Acts 27:20] Our troubles at times may seem overwhelming, and we can easily become dominated by fear. But Paul in faith directs his heart to God; and as he does, he hears from God a tremendous word of encouragement. When God speaks to Paul through an angel, the angel's first words to Paul are "Do not be afraid." [Acts 27:24] "Listen to God," the angel is saying, not fear.

The contrast between Paul, listening to God, and others on the boat, who are taking their cues from fears, is evident throughout the story. Early on in the story, when the boat was in the harbor at Fair Havens, the leaders on the ship were afraid of having to winter in a not so ideal spot (although modern scholarship has shown that the Fair Havens harbor was in fact suitable for wintering); and perhaps also they were afraid of financial loss if they did not get their wheat cargo to Italy as quickly as possible. Paul in contrast was taking his cue from God, and he warned them that it would be better for all if they stayed put. But the captain of the ship followed his fears and set sail. Later in the story, as the storm-tossed ship approached Malta, the sailors were afraid that they would crash on the rocks at great risk to their own lives, so they were ready to flee the ship in the small boat and leave everybody else to their doom. They were taking their cue from their fears. Paul,

in contrast, was attentive to God; he saw and stopped the plot. Throughout the journey as a whole, as many on board were sinking into despondency, Paul, in faith, saw reason for hope.

This leads us to the second principle of faith in our story: Trust that God, and not the storm, holds your future. This of course is not always easy. Imagine what it was like to be on that boat as the situation became bleaker day after day. We may have times in life when we cannot see past the storm—when everything seems only to be getting worse, and when the troubles of the present are compounded by the invisibility of the future. Paul, like the others, could not see beyond the storm; but he trusted that God held the future, and he had a particular conviction that God had a destiny for him in Rome. It was a trust well placed, as God brought them through the storm into safety.

This brings us to the third hallmark of faith in our story: as Paul trusts in God and listens to God, he acts for others instead of for himself. [*Act for others, instead of for self.*] Nothing is more common in the course of the story of this sea voyage than people acting to save their own skin. The ship's captain early on puts everyone at risk in order to potentially save as much profit as possible. The sailors, as we noted, were ready to abandon everybody else off of Malta in order to save themselves; and then the soldiers were ready to slaughter all the prisoners on the ship in order to save themselves the possibility of being charged for the prisoners' escape. Paul, in contrast, continually acts for the good of all, with the aim of bringing everyone safely through.

When we find ourselves threatened, it is natural to think foremost of our own well-being; but the Spirit of God turns our focus outward, and this indeed is part of the transforming power of faith. When we have faith, then a storm in life becomes not a time of scrambling to save oneself; it becomes rather an opportunity to reach out as a part of a larger purpose.

This in fact is how the story of Paul's voyage through the storm concludes (you can find the conclusion described in the next chapter in Acts). Having crash landed on Malta, Paul and the others come into contact with the natives of Malta, who, upon hearing Paul proclaim the gospel, accept Christ as Savior. Today, the people of Malta, an island dotted with churches, trace their Christian faith to that storm-tossed landing of Paul. Who would have guessed God's purpose in the storm—that the tempest would lead to the great result of a new people receiving the gospel? Today when we are in stormy times, it is good to look for how God may be at work through us to bring about a greater purpose.

So the storm does not have the last word; Christ has the last word. Together with Paul we can look to the Lord with faith and commitment, and so find courage, and real hope.