

Words and Deeds: Ready For The Storm

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Psalm 32; Matthew 8:24-27; Acts 27

Our final Scripture reading today is Acts 27. May God bless the reading of His sacred, inerrant, infallible Word. "When it was decided that we would sail for Italy, Paul and some other prisoners were handed over to a centurion named Julius, who belonged to the Imperial Regiment. We boarded a ship from Adramyttium about to sail for ports along the coast of the province of Asia, and we put out to sea. Aristarchus, a Macedonian from Thessalonica, was with us. The next day we landed at Sidon; and Julius, in kindness to Paul, allowed him to go to his friends so they might provide for his needs. From there we put out to sea again and passed to the lee of Cyprus because the winds were against us. When we had sailed across the open sea off the coast of Cilicia and Pamphylia, we landed at Myra in Lycia. There the centurion found an Alexandrian ship sailing for Italy and put us on board.

We made slow headway for many days and had difficulty arriving off Cnidus. When the wind did not allow us to hold our course, we sailed to the lee of Crete, opposite Salmone. We moved along the coast with difficulty and came to a place called Fair Havens, near the town of Lasea. Much time had been lost, and sailing had already become dangerous because by now it was after the Fast. So Paul warned them, "Men, I can see that our voyage is going to be disastrous and bring great loss to ship and cargo, and to our own lives also." But the centurion, instead of listening to what Paul said, followed the advice of the pilot and of the owner of the ship. Since the harbor was unsuitable to winter in, the majority decided that we should sail on, hoping to reach Phoenix and winter there. This was a harbor in Crete, facing both southwest and northwest. When a gentle south wind began to blow, they thought they had obtained what they wanted; so they weighed anchor and sailed along the shore of Crete.

Before very long, a wind of hurricane force, called the "northeaster," swept down from the island. The ship was caught by the storm and could not head into the wind; so we gave way to it and were driven along. As we passed to the lee of a small island called Cauda, we were hardly able to make the lifeboat secure. When the men had hoisted it aboard, they passed ropes under the ship itself to hold it together. Fearing that they would run aground on the sandbars of Syrtis, they lowered the sea anchor and let the ship be driven along. We took such a violent battering from the storm that the next day they began to throw the cargo overboard. On the third day, they threw the ship's tackle overboard with their own hands. When neither sun nor stars appeared for many days and the storm continued raging, we finally gave up all hope of being saved.

After the men had gone a long time without food, Paul stood up before them and said: "Men, you should have taken my advice not to sail from Crete; then you would have spared yourselves this damage and loss. But now I urge you to keep up your courage, because not one of you will be lost; only the ship will be destroyed. Last night an angel of the God whose I am and whom I serve stood beside me and said, 'Do not be afraid, Paul. You must stand trial before Caesar; and God has graciously given you the lives of all who sail with you.' So keep up your courage, men, for I have faith in God that it will happen just as he told me. Nevertheless, we must run aground on some island."

On the fourteenth night we were still being driven across the Adriatic Sea, when about midnight the sailors sensed they were approaching land. They took soundings and found that the water was a hundred and twenty feet deep. A short time later they took soundings again and found it was ninety feet deep. Fearing that we would be dashed against the rocks, they dropped four anchors from the stern and prayed for daylight. In an attempt to escape from the ship, the sailors let the lifeboat down into the sea, pretending they were going to lower some anchors from the bow. Then Paul said to the centurion and the soldiers, "Unless these men stay with the ship, you cannot be saved." So the soldiers cut the ropes that held the lifeboat and let it fall away.

Just before dawn Paul urged them all to eat. "For the last fourteen days," he said, "you have been in constant suspense and have gone without food -- you haven't eaten anything. Now I urge you to take some food. You need it to survive. Not one of you will lose a single hair from his head." After he said this, he took some bread and gave thanks to God in front of them all. Then he broke it and began to eat. They were all encouraged and ate some food themselves. Altogether there were 276 of us on board. When they had eaten as much as they wanted, they lightened the ship by throwing the grain into the sea.

When daylight came, they did not recognize the land, but they saw a bay with a sandy beach, where they decided to run the ship aground if they could. Cutting loose the anchors, they left them in the sea and at the same time untied the ropes that held the rudders. Then they hoisted the foresail to the wind and made for the beach. But the ship struck a sandbar and ran aground. The bow stuck fast and would not move, and the stern was broken to pieces by the pounding of the surf. The soldiers planned to kill the prisoners to prevent any of them from swimming away and escaping. But the centurion wanted to spare Paul's life and kept them from carrying out their plan. He ordered those who could swim to jump overboard first and get to land. The rest were to get there on planks or on pieces of the ship. In this way everyone reached land in safety."

I find huge bodies of water unnerving. Maybe it's because I'm an Indiana boy from the heart of landlock country, but there's something about a giant sea or lake that makes me nervous. I didn't really notice it until I was up in East Tawas and there's a point in the city right along the lake where you can stare out for miles and miles and see absolutely nothing. No homes on the other side, no distant island...just Lake Huron as far as the eye could see. Maybe it's the vast emptiness; maybe it's knowledge that the water can be unpredictable and dangerous. I don't know. A lot of Michiganders have been out in boats all their lives; they don't think about it. But miles and miles of open seas can be intimidating.

Today's passage is, in my opinion, one of the most exciting pieces of Scripture we find. Because Luke was along for the crazy ride, it's full of unique details and intimate observations. Now I suppose it's obvious that it's not meant to teach us about what to do if you're ever in a real typhoon out on the water. At the most literal level, this is simply a true story about what happened to Paul on his trip towards Rome. And yet, I believe that there are key elements here meant to get us ready for the metaphorical storms of life. So let's dive in – no pun intended.

Paul has appealed to Caesar for his trial, partially because it's clear he won't get a fair trial from Festus in Caesarea and partially because it is God's plan to have him testify about Jesus in the halls of power. Festus brought Paul before Herod Agrippa so he could understand more of the accusations against him. They listened, and all the aristocracy of the region agreed Paul could have been set free – except for the fact that this was now Caesar's case to hear.

Finally, in the fall of that year, Paul is assigned to Julius, a centurion whose job is to get a bunch of prisoners to Rome. Paul and Julius get along; there's respect there. After the first short leg of their travels, Julius allows Paul to meet up with the church in Sidon to supply his needs for the trip. It helps us to remember that in the ancient Roman world, prisoners were responsible for supplying their own food and provisions while they were in custody! Paul gets what he needs that he and his friends can make the journey...at least, the journey they expect to take.

Now they travel to various ports in the Mediterranean Sea, likely on boats for hire. The Romans didn't have a fleet of ships to get prisoners around; they usually paid for passage on private boats. They make slow but steady progress. They're never more than 50 nautical miles from land, but the winds are against them most of the time, and by the time they get to a boat that plans to get them to Italy, things are looking bad. They wind up somewhat off course and slowly make their way around the island of Crete.

Finally they reach the port of Fair Havens, the southernmost point of Crete. They've lost a ton of time, and because of the direction the winds come into Fair Havens, they're worried that the boat will get battered and maybe even destroyed if they stayed there very long. But the problem, which they know full well, is that the seas aren't going to get any better.

The fast known as the Day of Atonement fell in late September to early October, just about the time when the Mediterranean Sea starts to get really dangerous. By early November, boat traffic stopped until at least February.¹ But the centurion and the ship's owner and the ship's pilot are convinced they can make it just a little further around the island. They'll creep close to shore about 50 miles, and then they'll be fine for the winter. Barely a three hour tour...

And that leads me to our first thought for the day: *some storms in life are avoidable when you listen to God's wisdom and the wisdom of God's people.* Paul's sitting there like, "Guys, your plan is a disaster. We could lose everything – the ship, the cargo, our lives. Don't do this. Figure out a way to stay here." I imagine that the ship's crew was amused by this. Historically, Israel never had a navy. There were fishermen, sure, but not sailors; even Scripture hints at a fear of the seas. And here's this Paul guy trying to tell them how to run their business! Yet if they had listened to him, they would have saved their boat, their cargo, and not been in fear for their lives for weeks on end.

God puts people in our path that are wiser than us in order to steer us clear from storms and onto His paths. How many times would our lives have been less difficult if we had heeded the advice of someone trustworthy rather than following our own path? Proverbs 27:6 says, "the wounds of a friend are faithful." Someone who's genuinely our friend, who wants the best for us, who loves the Lord and loves us, they're not going to tell us what we want to hear -- they'll tell us wisdom we need to hear. Better the wound of a friend than the flattery of an enemy.

¹ Polhill, J. B. (1992). *Acts* (Vol. 26, p. 518). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

They are so many ways the world wants to steer us wrong. So when you're up against a decision that has major ramifications for your life and there's no absolute right or wrong answer, or maybe you know the right answer but it's hard or difficult, talk with those around you that have spiritual wisdom. Sometimes, you'll get a clear answer like the one Paul gave. Sometimes, the answers aren't so clear. And yet if you go to those who are really spiritually wise and disciplined, even if they don't have a direct answer from the Lord, they will give you good advice. They will pray for you and with you. They will stand with you whether your decision leads to a storm or not, and they will love you through it as Christ loves us.

Don't let our stubborn independent streak get in the way of asking for help when you need it. The more I walk with Jesus, the more I realize I need it. I have an accountability group I meet with late on Thursday nights. They help me to stay on task, to stay away from temptations and to help me grow. I have mentors I like to meet with that help me remember not to lose sight of Jesus in all the things I do for Jesus. You need these sort of things too. They may not look like mine, but I encourage you – be regularly checking in with those spiritually wiser than you so that you can avoid storms God has no intention for you to have to weather.

Moving on...we all know that Paul lost the argument. After all, it's just a day's journey around the island if they caught a good southern wind. So they set out. And oh boy, are they in trouble right from the start. In no time, the northeaster has gotten ahold of them, and they're 25 miles south of where they planned to be. It's then they hit the lee of a tiny island named Cauta, the first time they can do anything to keep the ship and the lifeboat from being torn apart. Before a couple of days pass, they are getting rid of cargo, tackle, anything they can do to keep from taking on so much water that they sink. And that's just the beginning of it.

But it also leads us to our second concept this morning: *no matter how big the storm is, God can see you through it.* If the story wasn't exciting enough, there are details that locals would know that we just don't. This storm is so bad that the sailors think that their ship is actually going to wind up destroyed on the sandbars of North Africa. Now this is a big ship – to hold 276 people meant it was really quite large. And yet this storm easily overpowers her. By the time this two week cruise of terror is done, the boat has traveled 476 miles. 476 miles! And the sailors are so panicked, they aren't eating. People are fasting, praying to their gods, sure they are doomed. Things are so bad that members of the crew are ready to abandon ship at the first hint of land. And yet not a single life, not one, was lost.

We face real storms in life, many we can't avoid. We face a few of our own making, but a lot of them worry us to no end. Things at the center get tense, especially around major events, and I wonder if I'll have to take care of my family without a second job. Every car we own needs repairs, and at 13 years old and 125,000 miles, I worry how to make it all work. Bills and payments, doctors' visits with tough news, family members in trouble, schoolwork piling up – the storms of life can be pretty rough. And when they all hit at the same time, we each have our own northeastern blowing down on us forcing us way off the course we'd expected.

We worry, but it's in God's hands, not our own. The sailors did everything they could to keep the ship afloat, and yet they had little to do with their survival. God saw 276 men, women, and children safely to shore through a storm that could have killed them all. He can see us through our financial troubles, our relationship difficulties, our tough classes and tough jobs.

Jesus reminded us in the Sermon on the Mount, “Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.” He said, don’t worry about what you’ll eat or drink, what you’ll wear, not even about your body or even your life. God has these things in hand, and God knows you need them. I love how one paraphrase puts it: “Why be like the pagans who are so deeply concerned about these things?” If we have Jesus, what truly matters will be given to us.

Now you might think, “Easy for you to say.” All of us reach points in our storms that are very, very difficult. Luke evens says it in verse 20: “We finally gave up all hope of being saved.” And that leads me to our final thought: *in a storm, fear is a given for everyone, but faith can overcome fear*. Remember that Paul went into this having been told by Jesus in a vision that he would be His witness in Rome. Paul had God’s own assurance that he would be OK. And yet, this storm was so incredibly bad that Paul faltered. An angel comes to Paul with a message for the whole ship, which is awesome. But the angel’s first words are, “Don’t be afraid.” Before the angel confirms that the whole lot of them will be saved, he assures Paul that he is to stand before Caesar. Paul knew this, yet the angel needed to give him personal reassurance. Paul!

There’s a difference between fear and worry. Fear is natural. When you’re in a situation where you sense danger, fear is the natural reaction. A bear is running after you, you don’t feel fear, something is wrong with you. You head to war with guys with machine guns on the other side, you don’t feel fear, something is wrong with you. Worry is a choice, one way to deal with fear, and it is to become anxious and upset and frustrated. But it is not the only choice.

Faith is the most clear choice for us. It’s the choice Paul makes. And that choice not only brings him comfort, it brings relief to the entire ship, who can eventually have a meal in the midst of this raging tempest. While it doesn’t look like they celebrated Communion onboard, the words that Luke uses are deliberate. It is Christ who will save them, and the way that Luke describes it, this meal that Paul leads them in is pointing to Christ. In the midst of a boat full of pagans, Jesus is worshipped and, at least for the Christians, there’s a sense that Jesus is with them as they have this meal before they are finally delivered from this nightmare.

You have faith. Will you put it into action when the storms arise? Worry does us no good; in fact, it becomes sin. But faith gives us hope. Yes, I have three cars sitting in my driveway, all of which have a warning light on the dashboard. But God has gotten us everywhere we needed to go this week...no problems there, and some of you would drive us if we needed it. Yes, it’s a hard season at work, but it’s always hard when we have a major event, and these events help the center reach more people for Jesus. Faith gives us the angle that we so desperately need, the angle that even if everything doesn’t work out perfect – even if the ship breaks up on the rocks, which sometimes happens – it will still be OK in God’s hands.

Friends, maybe you’re on smooth seas. If you are, give God thanks for giving you blue skies and gentle breezes. And maybe you’re on the roughest waters you’ve ever seen. If you are, turn to your Savior, turn to those you trust who are wise in His ways, and turn to your faith, which will see you through any storm.