

Sermon – August 25, 2024
“God has granted safety to all those who are sailing with you.”
The Rev. John C. Wright



Text: Acts 27:18-26,35-38,43-44

Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come, Holy Spirit, come, visit, fill open hearts, and anoint the sharing of these words. Bless those who hear them, use them to fan the flames of our continuing transformation into Christ's image, and lead us out into fruitful labor in Jesus' mission right here, right now. Lord, come and astonish us with your word this day. Amen

The Spirit of Jesus in me greets the Spirit of Jesus in you and brings us together in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Good morning! This is the day that the Lord has made! Let us rejoice and be glad in it! If there is one chapter in Acts that I would recommend we all read, chapter 27 would be that chapter. Luke's description of the storm at sea is one of the best written and insightful chapters in our Bibles, in my opinion. The word sailing occurs at least eleven times in this chapter and that might influence my interest. There are storms, struggles, and final victory found in this chapter. And Luke, who was with Paul on this part of his journey to Rome, narrates it all well. The chapter has been studied by many scholars for the insight it gives for Christian living, and it is the primary source for our knowledge of nautical context from the first century. If you have not read this chapter, let me encourage you to do so and see if you don't get caught up in Luke's narrative and feel as if you also are on this ship with Paul.

I want to take us back in biblical time to another time when there was a smaller boat at sea, one filled with Jesus and the twelve disciples. They also experience a storm and they see

Jesus' command over nature demonstrated. I will read the version from Luke 8:22-25. "One day he got into a boat with his disciples, and he said to them, 'Let us go across to the other side of the lake.' So, they put out, and while they were sailing, he fell asleep. A windstorm swept down on the lake, and the boat was filling with water, and they were in danger. They went to him and woke him up, shouting, 'Master, Master, we are perishing!' And he woke up and rebuked the wind and the raging waves; they ceased, and there was a calm. He said to them, 'Where is your faith?' They were afraid and amazed, and said to one another, 'Who then is this, that he commands even the winds and the water, and they obey him?' "i Here the disciples are out on a lake and Jesus, tired out from the day of teaching and healing, has fallen asleep in the boat, and a windstorm sweeps down on them and they are about to perish. Many of these men are seasoned sailors and fishermen, men who know the waters and wind, and they recognize that they are about to sink and be in the chaotic waters. They have lost all hope and as a last resort, they wake up Jesus and cry out to him that they are perishing. Jesus rebukes the wind and raging waves and then asks his disciples where their faith has gone. Jesus is with them; they have no worries. They wonder who Jesus is, that even the wind and the waves obey him, things in nature that only God can control. From this story we should understand that when Jesus is with us, we have no worries. There is no storm so great that Jesus cannot instantly speak the word and calm its chaos.

Now fast forward to the year AD 59, late in the summer, the time when windstorms on the Mediterranean Sea are common. Paul, Luke, and the centurion taking Paul to Rome are on a sailing ship carrying wheat from Egypt to Rome. Paul is on the move again to Rome to stand before the emperor and testify about Jesus. Paul was not in the boat with Jesus on the lake and most likely has not seen Luke's notes on the violent storm and Jesus' action there. But Paul is a seasoned traveler and has been shipwrecked before. The first boat Paul sailed on struggles with unfavorable winds and arrives at its destination after the time of year when storms on the Mediterranean are common. Paul is placed on a new ship and will advise the owner, crew, and centurion that it is not safe to travel. Yet, they will put out to sea in hopes of finding a better place to spend the winter and they get caught in a violent windstorm. Their ordeal is not a quick, during-the-night windstorm like Jesus and the disciples experienced on the lake. This storm lasts for more than fourteen days and throughout that time, they are driven across the sea by the wind and the waves. So chaotic is the storm that for those fourteen days, none of those on board eats anything. Many of them may be seasick but by day fourteen, all have given up hope of being

saved and are anticipating they will be lost at sea. They have done what they could to strengthen the ship to survive the storm, and keep in mind that these grain haulers are not passenger ships. There is no accommodation below deck for the passengers and crew who normally sleep on the deck exposed or under a tent. They have been fourteen days and nights in the wind and crashing water with no food. They are exhausted, cold, weak, hungry, and without hope of surviving.

Now from the disciples' experience with Jesus on the lake, we would expect Paul to stand up, rebuke the wind and waves, and there to be a great calm, but that is not what happens. Paul instead is given the lives of those traveling with him and assurance that he will testify in Rome about Jesus. He sees an angel sent to strengthen him and bring hope to the hopeless. Paul does not calm the storm, but he does share that all will survive and then gives thanks to God, breaks bread, takes it, and eats. He encourages all on board by sharing what he has learned from the messenger from God, that they will survive the storm but that the ship and cargo will be lost. He encourages them all to eat as they will need strength to complete the ordeal. And they are encouraged and eat until they are all satisfied. Paul will not calm the wind and the sea as Jesus did, but he is confident that they will all be saved.

The sailors discover that they are approaching land and drop anchors to protect the ship from running aground in the night. They also try to escape in the lifeboat, but Paul insists that they must stay in the ship if all are to be saved. Their skills will yet be needed to get the ship close to shore. Daylight comes. They don't recognize the land, but they see a potential landing area and use their skills to move the ship in that direction. The ship runs aground not too far from shore and after the centurion keeps Paul alive by preventing the soldiers from killing the prisoners, they all either swim to shore or drift there on pieces of the ship that is now being broken up by the waves. I love the way this chapter ends. Luke writes, "And so it was that all were brought safely to land." That is about as close to "peace, be still" as get going through the storm. The ship is lost, the cargo is in the sea, but the crew and passengers are all alive and safe on the shore.

We also experience storms in our lives. Sometimes we share our storms with each other and the congregation. Sometimes we share them with a few others. But too often we keep the storms that are threatening our lives to ourselves, seeking to survive them alone. We desire for Jesus to wake up when we cry to him and speak into our storm the words, "Peace, be still," rebuking the storm we are struggling in. And for some of us, for some of our storms, Jesus will

do just that, and we will find his power at work calming our storms. But other times, and more likely, we are like Paul and get to ride out the storm with others and see Jesus work through people to bring us relief. We also, like Paul, have to be listening to Jesus, reading his words found in our Bibles, and trusting in his promises. We need to be those who trust in Jesus, and in the midst of the storms in our lives, stop and give praise to Jesus.

Notice also that as Paul and those with him move through the storm, they do some pretty insightful things to help themselves survive. Let's look at their actions and see if we can capture them to be ready for our own storms. First, as soon as they know they are in a storm, they do everything they can to keep their ship afloat. They set and trim sails, put out a sea anchor, undergird the vessel, and haul in the lifeboat. They use what is available to them to get their ship in shape to ride out the storm. We will want to do the same. We will want to take stock of what actions we can take and go ahead and take them, and then we will want to bathe our situation in prayer.

As their storm worsens, and they are in it day after day, they take other actions as well. They begin to throw overboard the cargo and ship's tackle, so the ship has less chance of sinking. We will need to take stock of our own situations when we are in a storm, and we also will need to jettison everything we do not need to help us get through the storm, and we will want to spend more time in prayer asking Jesus to guide our steps. When our storm is a medical issue, we will need to seek the best medical care we can access. In a financial storm, we will want to seek the best advice from those who are more knowledgeable than ourselves and let Jesus guide us through our storm with sound advice from these experts. By all means, when we are in a storm, we want to get to work and help our situation. When Luke describes the recovery of the lifeboat from the raging waves, he uses the pronoun "we." Luke is part of the recovery team hauling on a line to get the boat aboard with many others. He may even have had blisters to remind him of the work he helped with during the storm.

Another aspect of the storm we should see is that those in the storm start throwing overboard things that are weighing down the boat. They toss overboard the ship's tackle, the devices needed to load and unload cargo. They toss overboard the wheat and all of the cargo, and they will eventually release the ship's boat. We also will need to take stock of what we are holding on to and release those things in our lives that weigh us down and threaten our survival.

Our storm survival goal is to be able to get to shore and save our lives, and we need to release everything that might hinder our own journeys in the storms we encounter in this life.

Paul makes the point to the centurion that all must stay in the boat in order for them to be saved. They will need the expertise of the crew who is trying to sneak away from the ship in the storm. The crew will be needed to set the sails, release the rudders and anchors, and drive the ship onto the beach. Those of us who go into our storms alone face the full strength of the storms alone and will be overwhelmed. Those who are willing to ask for help benefit from others. When we begin to know what is happening in a brother or sister's life, we can begin to pray, seek to come alongside, and join them while encouraging and helping as we are able. We need others when we find ourselves in the midst of life's storms.

One of the key storm survival strategies we should adopt is the one Jesus points out to the disciples that they were missing and the one we see Paul experience. We are to have faith, to trust in God, and know that God keeps his promises. God promised Paul that he would go and testify in Rome and to do that, Paul had to get from the boat anchored in the storm to safety and then on to Rome. God also gives Paul the lives of those on the boat; only the ship and cargo are lost. Paul prays and when he hears from God through an angel, he trusts God; he has faith in God. Paul comes in front of those with him and gives them hope by sharing the promise God has given him and then encourages them all by giving thanks to God and in the breaking of bread. In the midst of the storm, Paul thanks God and eats, giving hope, courage, and strength through the bread so that they might have the strength they need to move from the ship to the shore. Remember that on the road to Emmaus following Jesus' ascension, it was in the breaking of bread that Jesus was made known. As Paul gives thanks and eats, those present without hope are given new hope that Paul's God will watch over them.

God also watches over Paul through the kindness of the centurion who does not allow the soldiers to kill the prisoners, sparing Paul's life and the lives of all the prisoners on board. Instead of having them killed, the centurion has those who can swim, swim to shore and those who cannot swim follow on pieces of the rapidly breaking up ship. We also will need to have faith and to hold to the promises of God when we find ourselves in a storm. The prayer of a righteous person availeth much (James 5:16). When Paul prays, he is given the lives of all on board. In our case, we want to be those who are praying over the needs, challenges, and storms that are active in our congregation. Don't miss that the last part of the journey to shore is

completed through people working in their increased strength by the eating of bread. God strengthens them through the food that Paul encourages them to take, and now to get to shore, they must use that strength to swim and ride parts of the boat. We also will need strength and to use our strength and gifts to work with Jesus's help to get through the storms that come into our lives. We will need to recognize that Jesus is with us and let him strengthen us for the trials we face.

Before I close this morning, I want to share with us another storm at sea that shaped John Wesley, Methodism, and me. For those following the daily Seedbed Wake-Up Calls, you will have already heard of John Wesley's experience as he returned from his failed mission trip to America. On the return trip, the ship ran into a violent storm that threatened to sink the ship. John recalled that with each wave, the ship shuddered, groaned, and seemed to struggle to rise again from its descent down the face of each large wave. There were two groups of people onboard the ship, the English returning from America and a group of Moravians who were likewise headed back to Germany. When a wave crashed into the ship, the English cried out in fear that they were lost and would drown and die. Each wave brought new cries of fear from the English. John himself writes that one wave that tore the mainsail and snapped some of the boat's structure also brought cries from the English and himself. Yet in the midst of the storm, he noticed the Moravians were singing psalms of praise to God. They were praising God and were fearless in the storm. When the storm was over, John asked one of the Moravian men if he was afraid to die and he said no. John asked if the women and children were afraid to die and the reply was again no, they were not afraid to die. The English were full of fear and John examined himself and realized he too was afraid to die. He also realized that these Moravians had something he did not have, and God used that experience to awaken a desire in John Wesley to find the fearlessness of death he had witnessed. He traveled to Germany shortly after his return to England and spent time with the Moravians, seeking to learn more about their faith. It's there that John began to put together the ideas of bands, classes, and societies that became key transformational aspects of the Methodist movement. It is also there that he developed the idea of the need for praise of God, and that idea grew into thousands of hymns that he and his brother Charles wrote and Methodists still sing in times of joy and in storms, great hymns of praise for the people of God. John will need two other experiences, Aldersgate where he finds assurance

and Fetter Lane where he is filled with the Spirit, before he finds the faith of the Moravians. Those are moments to share in other sermons.

When I read the account of John Wesley's storm years ago, I also asked myself the question that John did, one that we all need to ask ourselves: "Am I afraid to die?" For me, seeking an answer to that question was the start of a journey that continues today as I, like John, seek the faith that does not fear death, as if I had already died with Jesus and have been raised with him to everlasting life. Let me share that none of us gets out of this life alive. All will die. The wages of sin are death. We need a savior who takes away the sting of death and who has won victory over death. Jesus Christ is such a savior, who died for us that we might live with him for all eternity. Let me encourage us to ask ourselves, "Are we afraid to die?" If we are not, then praise God. If we are, then we too need to seek a deeper trust, a deeper faith in Jesus. We need the support of each other to help us be transformed and raised up now with Jesus by completely trusting in him. Storms will come into our lives and as we journey through them, we will need each other and Jesus. He may speak the word and rebuke the wind and the waves, or he may strengthen us as we release what we cling to but no longer need and we go through the storm with him. The old saying and song are too true: everyone wants to go to heaven, but no one wants to die. Jesus challenges us to come and die that we might live.

If you find you are in a storm this morning and are trying to go through that storm alone, let me encourage you to come to the altar and let me pray for you and ask Jesus to come and be present with you and strengthen you so that you do not struggle alone.

Pray with me. Jesus, we confess that in the midst of the storm we want to hear you rebuke the wind and waves and bring peace to our chaos. Jesus, help us to be transformed that we might have the faith needed to praise you in the midst of the storm, no matter the outcome. Strengthen us to journey with you now and forever. We pray in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen

The Spirit of the Lord is upon us, because he has anointed us to bring good news to the poor. He has sent us to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. Have faith in Jesus and praise him in the midst of the storms in our lives. Amen

¹ Bibles, Harper . NRSV Bible with the Apocrypha (p. 3125). Zondervan. Kindle Edition.