

Acts | The Incendiary Fellowship

The Storm and the Bread

Acts 27.18-37

8.6.17

The next day as we were being violently storm-tossed, they began to jettison the cargo;¹⁹ and on the third day they threw the ship's tackle overboard with their own hands.²⁰ Since neither sun nor stars appeared for many days, and no small storm was assailing us, from then on all hope of our being saved was gradually abandoned.²¹ When they had gone a long time without food, then Paul stood up in their midst and said, "Men, you ought to have followed my advice and not to have set sail from Crete and incurred this damage and loss.²² "Yet now I urge you to keep up your courage, for there will be no loss of life among you, but only of the ship.²³ "For this very night an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I serve stood before me,²⁴ saying, 'Do not be afraid, Paul; you must stand before Caesar; and behold, God has granted you all those who are sailing with you.'²⁵ "Therefore, keep up your courage, men, for I believe God that it will turn out exactly as I have been told.²⁶ "But we must run aground on a certain island."

²⁷ But when the fourteenth night came, as we were being driven about in the Adriatic Sea, about midnight the sailors began to surmise that they were approaching some land.²⁸ They took soundings and found it to be twenty fathoms; and a little farther on they took another sounding and found it to be fifteen fathoms.²⁹ Fearing that we might run aground somewhere on the rocks, they cast four anchors from the stern and wished for daybreak.³⁰ But as the sailors were trying to escape from the ship and had let down the ship's boat into the sea, on the pretense of intending to lay out anchors from the bow,³¹ Paul said to the centurion and to the soldiers, "Unless these men remain in the ship, you yourselves cannot be saved."³² Then the soldiers cut away the ropes of the ship's boat and let it fall away.³³ Until the day was about to dawn, Paul was encouraging them all to take some food, saying, "Today is the fourteenth day that you have been constantly watching and going without eating, having taken nothing.³⁴ "Therefore I encourage you to take some food, for this is for your preservation, for not a hair from the head of any of you will perish."³⁵ Having said this, he took bread and gave thanks to God in the presence of all, and he broke it and began to eat.³⁶ All of them were encouraged and they themselves also took food.³⁷ All of us in the ship were two hundred and seventy-six persons.

The Acts of the Apostles moves from Jerusalem to Rome – that's the general geographic flow/direction of the book. Luke, the physician wrote his first volume, The Gospel According to Luke and THAT book could've been titled, "from Galilee to Jerusalem". This second volume could be called, "From Jerusalem to Rome."

Now we're ALMOST at Rome...almost at the very end of our long series...and just when it looked like smooth sailing for Paul...just as he was to reach his goal, he undergoes a horrific ordeal...a kind of death and resurrection (MIRRORS volume one – see v 19 "third day").

It's an exciting scene...it's a sermon that almost requires sound effects...the sounds of waves crashing and sailors yelling or gusts of wind and sheets of rain and creaking of wood...and it lasts for some two weeks!

Luke wants us to see: this is no ordinary storm (14) – it's the kind of storm that can't be ignored/managed. It leaves people not just glum/SAD (Seasonal Affective Disorder) ...THIS is the storm that's dangerous even deadly ...a crisis...and leads to despair.

Storms are often used as metaphors – “the winds of change” or “waves of despair” or a “flood of anxious thoughts” ... These images are found in songs/hymns and in the Bible, “the seas have lifted up, O Lord...the seas have lifted up their voice...” (Ps 93)

Sometimes stuff just piles up (I hope that wasn't your experience in the last week...but there's always NEXT week!)...And we all go through it. Sometimes whole seasons of life are overwhelming; when on EVERY front we're facing loss and discouragement.

Right before reaching his goal...Paul faces a literal storm...but there's a lot in the scene that is emblematic or symbolic of “the storms of life” and what to DO...and think when we face these huge troubles.

Let's see: 1) The Storm as Metaphor/Symbol
2) The Birth and Nurture of Faith in the Midst of the Storm

Paul appealed to Caesar and “to Caesar he will go” – the governors in Jerusalem learned that he was a Roman citizen and they granted his request NOT to return to Jerusalem (where he would NOT get a fair trial) but instead go to Nero...the emperor.

Paul is with some other prisoners and two friends, Luke (who wrote the story) and Aristarchus (another Christian from Greece). A Roman centurion is in charge of transporting Paul and the other prisoners to the “center of the world” – the great City of Rome!

And as they sort of transfer from ship to ship, they finally get on a big ship, a cargo ship carrying grain from Egypt to Rome...but it's pretty LATE in the season for this journey because it's getting cold and stormy and “sailors beware”... And in fact, Paul urges them to park it for the winter...but they didn't listen to him...after all, what does a rabbi know about sailing on the Mediterranean (little do they know that Paul has logged about 3500 miles sailing that sea!)

And then the storm comes, violently. Luke stacks up the descriptors in vv. 18-20 – “violently storm-tossed...jettison the cargo...they threw the ships rigging over-board...” Why is Luke going into such detail especially since that's NOT how ancient historians normally wrote (remember: paper was hard to get).

Well, he wants us to see that this was a CRISIS of epic proportions – a named storm! All hands on deck and “Houston: we have a problem.” “Ladies and gentlemen – please brace for impact!”

He adds that, “neither sun nor stars appeared for many days” – that’s a way of saying, “We had NO idea where we were! No navigational markers!” It’d be like driving your car in the middle of a pitch-black night and your headlights fail...no GPS...no visibility!

This was NO SMALL STORM (v. 20) and the sum of all fears (quote) “all hope of being saved was gradually abandoned” – it’s like they’re throwing everything overboard and finally they throw HOPE overboard too.

And then Luke adds to this that try as they might, they cannot save themselves – they try dropping the anchors and binding the ship with cables and loosing the lifeboats...and ...NOTHING! 276 souls will perish.

This isn’t the kind of predicament you face every day but sooner or later you will face SOMETHING like this – some difficulty that has so many layers/complications that you just don’t see any way out and finally, “all hope of being saved (is) gradually abandoned”

This is the definition of a crisis...AND what we often SAY around here is “A Crisis Is a Terrible Thing to Waste”... and what I mean by “wasting the crisis” is that IN THE HEAT OF THE BATTLE, our true self starts to come to light. We begin to see things about ourselves that we have successfully suppressed up to now.

Perhaps other people have seen these things in us and they see these flaws and character defects in us as the crisis unfolds...and WE TOO...see the faults and maybe for the first time we can’t ignore them.

And to waste the crisis means to somehow manage or manipulate or handle our difficulties so that the difficulty passes...but the deeper STUFF in our character never gets addressed.

In the storm, we may make promises. We may turn over a new leaf. We may make deals with people and swear that we’ve learned our lesson and that we’ll change. We may feel some sense of shame (so painful! Often more painful than the crisis itself!)

A man may have a very embarrassing angry outburst IN THE MIDST of the storm...and may respond by reading a book on anger-management...but he never gets to the roots of the anger and never discovers WHY he gets so angry. And when the storm is past, he tries to be a little nicer...counts to ten...does breathing exercises...alters his behavior but NOT his character and NOT HIS WHOLE motivational platform.

But here...and sometimes in life...for all of us it will happen at least ONCE...sometimes (even if only once) there will be a crisis that JUST CAN'T BE HANDLED. Such was the case with Paul and the 276 souls.

AND YET...it is almost always the case that FAITH germinates in the soil of despair. Until real angst and desperation and hopelessness set in, we rely only on ourselves and the people around us... Desperation is the necessary environment for the birth and nurture of true faith.

And what God does here is to use this crisis/despair to sensitize the crew and passengers to the treasure they have failed to recognize on that ship. There is a man who has an inside track with God...a man who belongs (23) to the Lord of the Storm.

They didn't see this man, Paul the Apostle of Jesus Christ, they didn't see him as anything special. When he'd urged them to winter in a safe harbor they ignored him (he's no sailor – he's a landlubber!). But NOW they're desperate and they're ready to listen.

God has used the crisis to establish the credentials of his emissary and the sailors are ready to listen. God appeared to Paul...an angel or messenger appeared to Paul and promised to complete Paul's life's calling: "You MUST stand before Caesar because I have decreed it...and I have decreed to save every sailor on that ship."

Paul relays that promise to the despairing men and they are JUST desperate enough to believe.

Then Paul himself shows them what faith looks like (25) – "Therefore keep up your courage men for I believe God..." They're sort of living off Paul's faith – they are en-couraged (courage is transmitted!) and hope returns – Paul is sort of believing for them (BTW, what a wonderful picture of what Christian parents do for their children – we believe for them until faith is born IN them!)

Then Paul makes it clear – "BUT we must stick together! I am the man with the promise – separate from ME and you remove yourself from the promise!" (very similar to when Lot separated from Abraham in Genesis 13 – he left the man of promise.)

And Paul is showing – faith is not a strictly private, every-man-for-himself, personal journey. It always brings the person who believes INTO community.

When a few rascal sailors try to steal the lifeboat as a way of saving themselves, Paul protests, "Unless these men stay in the ship, you yourselves cannot be saved!"

As I said, it's emblematic. This is a story of physical rescue but it symbolizes certain truths about God and faith and what it means to be rescued spiritually.

Stay on the Ship! Stay connected to the Body, to the local church. We are spiritually interdependent like organs in a body, we need each other – abide!

And then Paul does something else emblematic – something that illustrates a deeper universal truth and something that must've struck them all as being a little weird – they cut the lines and lose the lifeboat (there's NO WAY OUT NOW!) and then Paul says, "I KNOW! Let's eat!"

And in a gesture that looks a lot like Holy Communion, "Paul took bread and gave thanks to God in the presence of all and he broke it and began to eat." (35)

My own professor William Larkin wrote about this: "It was an acted parable in which physical salvation... mediated by God's apostle points to the spiritual salvation of which this apostle is ALSO a messenger."

Paul's saying, "As ONE we will be nourished and as ONE we will be saved..." And as the sailors and fellow prisoners ate, it says, "All of them were encouraged and they themselves also took food."

Was it a Communion Service? No...but it was sort of priming the pump. It was like a physical therapist moving the arm of a patient over and over again and then saying, "Now YOU move it that same way."

Paul was showing them...and more than just teaching...he was moving them and en-couraging and saying, "See? This is what it's like to be on the True Ship...the Ark...the Church... And this is what it's like to believe God's promise...and be nourished on God's grace... We eat the Bread that comes down from Heaven...even when all hell is breaking loose around us...even when we cut all ties with our former self-salvation projects...we let go the lifeboats and we stay on board...and eating seems silly and useless...and YET...it nourishes our faith. It imparts cheer."

The passage ends (not printed) in v. 44, "And so it was that they were all brought safely to land."

One key to life is to get to the end of yourself. We all get there eventually (as I mentioned last week: when we float away and look down on our body on our deathbed) but the key is to get there before that.

And in that moment...in that crisis when we begin to see how powerless we are...powerless against hurricanes and microorganisms and cancer...but often we see that we're powerless to change our children and powerless to fix our marriages and powerless to change our motives/character ...sometimes we can't even change our behavior... AND ultimately, the crisis may give us a view to real me, "I am a deeply flawed person...I have not obeyed God's commands...I deserve God's displeasure and justice... AND I CAN'T FIX THIS!"

And when we get to that place – the crisis that JUST can't be managed...and in the storm (the health crisis, the family crisis, the moral failure, the addiction, the inner collapse) when we see in that VERY painful, raw moment, "Only Jesus Christ can fix me... and YES! He has lived obediently ON MY BEHALF – so that I am credited with HIS Good Works! ...and He has died to pay my penalty...and He IS risen as God's message to me saying, "T.J. – I accept you...the storm will not crush the real YOU... You belong to Me and I love YOU with an everlasting love..."

When I see that, then Jesus Christ becomes the Bread in the Storm...and I eat/drink Him...my Bread in the Storm...and I am en-couraged...He imparts courage to me.

Let's do it together right now...the world feels like a very uncertain place right now ...a storm...but for a few minutes we're together on the ship...rejoicing and eating Bread in the midst of the Storm.

The Communion

As you look over the horizon or your life, you may see quite clearly some area or areas where you are just o v e r w h e l m e d . . .

It may be a marriage and family thing – a relationship that is hopelessly cold/distant/tense (and you just don't know how to fix...you just can't) or a habit that you seem unable to break... could be church (you know you SHOULD be in real relationship with people in a church...you've tried but just can't break the inertia (can't make yourself want to)... OR an area of great fear/anxiety that has you constantly thinking about your health, finances, children, safety, work etc.

Well as we come to the Table...see yourself as taking Bread in the Storm. It seems counterintuitive like you should be DOING something...batten down the hatches...tow that line...hoist that sail...get in that lifeboat and MAKE IT HAPPEN... try harder!

Manage that CRISIS!

Instead...as the storm rages... just relax...stay on the Ship... take and eat. Receive Jesus Christ as the nourishment of your soul. Receive Him again. Tune out the sound of the winds and waves; take and eat.

Instead of the storm and howling wind, INSTEAD, hear God say to your soul... "Eat this promise as the very word of God, the Gospel, I am YOUR Savior – I love you deeply - YOU belong to Me. Be NOT afraid."

Receive Jesus Christ by faith. As the mouth eats the Bread and drinks the Wine so now let faith receive Jesus Christ and be encouraged. (Pray in Silence)