

Against the Wind

March 8, 2020

Acts 27:1-26

We are entering the home stretch in our study of the book of Acts. Paul has been languishing for over 2 years in confinement in Caesarea on the coast of modern Israel. Finally, he has his day before Festus and Agrippa, where he challenges them to ponder his message, the gospel of Jesus. As we learned last week in Pastor Kyle's sermon, the end result was another announcement of no merit to the calls for Paul's death. They did not agree with the accusers, and yet they did not set Paul free. In other words, they were more motivated by fear of rioting by the Jews than they were justice for an innocent man. So...they simply kicked the can down the road, blaming Paul for having appealed to Caesar.

That's where we pick up the story this morning. For the next few weeks, we will be accompanying Paul on his journey to Rome. As I've been reading the text, three weird images come to my mind. The first part of the text reminds me of a trip down memory lane. Many of the names of the places are cities where Paul has previously been, planted churches, been kicked out of town. From there, a short trip across the sea to Greece became a nightmare on the open sea, reminding me either of Gilligan's Island, or even the book of Jonah, only in reverse. So, as we read this text, don't get caught up in all the names, we will point them out on a map, but instead capture the eyewitness report of a man on a journey, not of his choosing, but certainly propelled by God Himself. God is delivering some cargo to Rome! READ Acts 27:1-26.

Main point: Life is a journey into the unknown, directed by God Himself.

Now, I'm fully aware that for some of us, this brings up very bad images. If God is directing this journey, then what kind of a God is He? But the truth is that He IS God, He IS in control, He HAS purposes that are beyond us. And if

only we could see things from His perspective, it would all make sense. The problem is we don't have that perspective. All we can see are the winds and the waves. We would have to have a scribe like Luke writing after the fact, telling the story from a broader perspective, as one who knew that everyone made it safely to their destination, that God used that time to accomplish His purposes beyond all expectations or even dreams. It's hard to have such a perspective when you are in a hurricane and your ship is coming apart!

I trust you can tell where I am going this morning. Yes, this is a fantastic story of great adventure on the high seas, the stuff of epic movies. But in another sense it is simply the story of our lives, unfolding around us. If only we had the wider perspective... (2 parts)

I. Life is a mixture of pleasant and not so pleasant experiences. vv. 1-12

I know this point is not very profound, but it is the truth. We ought to expect life to be filled with all sorts of experiences: planned and unplanned, pleasant and unpleasant, under our control and under the control of people who lack even common sense. It is a mixture of all of it. And yet we must have the perspective that all of life is under the watchful eye and direct control of Almighty God. Nothing escapes His attention, nothing is beyond His ability to control. Even the worst of situations, if He allows it to happen, WILL be used to bring Him glory and advance His Kingdom. I say this with all certainty, knowing that great tragedies can and do happen. We have seen such things even this week, whether the latest virus that threatens mankind or a tornado in Tennessee. But unless we see things from His perspective, we will never appreciate life for what it is and has been designed to be. Our God is taking us on a journey.

27 And when it was decided that we should sail for Italy, they delivered Paul and some other prisoners to a centurion of the Augustan Cohort named Julius.

Finally, things are happening. Paul is shifted from under Festus' authority to that of a Roman centurion, Julius. His job is now to deliver his cargo (Paul) safely to Rome to stand trial before Caesar's court. But even as we begin the narrative, I want you to see the picture of Paul as cargo. He has been delivered to a courier along with other prisoners. The cargo is now in transit.

² And embarking in a ship of Adramyttium, which was about to sail to the ports along the coast of Asia, we put to sea, accompanied by Aristarchus, a Macedonian from Thessalonica.

They found a ship sailing in that general direction. It was a merchant ship, carrying cargo, to be picked up and delivered along the coast of the Mediterranean Sea. In other words, this was a ship that regularly traveled this route. Only this time, it had aboard some precious cargo: the man of God. We notice here that Paul is accompanied by at least two people, Aristarchus, whom we note is mentioned in several New Testament letters, and one more: Luke. I say this because of the use of the first person pronoun "we." So, Paul's traveling party was himself, Luke, and Aristarchus, and perhaps more, who knows. It was important to Luke to note that Aristarchus was picked up along the way in Thessalonica, on one of Paul's journeys. So, along an earlier journey, Paul picked up a companion who stayed with him, even while he was a prisoner being transported to faraway Rome.

³ The next day we put in at Sidon. And Julius treated Paul kindly and gave him leave to go to his friends and be cared for. ⁴ And putting out to sea from there we sailed under the lee of Cyprus, because the winds were against us.

(Slide) They head up along the coast, stopping at various port cities along the way. But as I've suggested, we know many of these cities because Paul previously

went there. In fact, Julius must have been impacted by Paul because he let him visit friends. Are you catching the picture? Julius is ushering Paul on a reunion tour! Now, we are not told of tears on the beach as we have had before, but I am quite confident he could have. I'm sure his visits included such things.

But here we also see the start of things not going so well. You see, it was the fall of the year and the winds were starting to shift, coming from the northwest, making travel more difficult. They had to alter their plans, they were delayed along the way.

⁵ And when we had sailed across the open sea along the coast of Cilicia and Pamphylia, we came to Myra in Lycia.

I trust many of you recognize these names. These are the coastal cities of southern modern-day Turkey, cities where Paul previously traveled. Remember, they stopped at all of them. I'm sure there were reunions at all of them. So far, so good....

⁶ There the centurion found a ship of Alexandria sailing for Italy and put us on board.

At this point, they changed vessels, finding one that would be able to take them the rest of the way. Likely, it was a larger grain ship, bringing grain from the outer territories of the Roman empire back to Rome. We know it was a cargo ship from later in the story, but here we simply know it is a ship going all the way to Rome, needing first to cross the sea from Turkey to Greece. At least that's where they were headed...

⁷ We sailed slowly for a number of days and arrived with difficulty off Cnidus, and as the wind did not allow us to go farther, we sailed under the lee of Crete off Salmone. ⁸ Coasting along it with difficulty, we came to a place called Fair Havens, near which was the city of Lasea.

This is where things go off the rails. Instead of taking the short route directly across the sea, they can't go forward but instead get blown south. (Slide) You can see the change of direction. I think the situation is clear. They are headed west but can't go west. So, they give in to the wind and take the southern route, along Crete. Now Crete is an island some 160 miles long, so they ought to be protected from the strong northerly winds, right? And their latest port of call is called "Fair Havens." Don't you suppose they should stay at a place called "Fair Havens?"

⁹ Since much time had passed, and the voyage was now dangerous because even the Fast was already over, Paul advised them, ¹⁰ saying, "Sirs, I perceive that the voyage will be with injury and much loss, not only of the cargo and the ship, but also of our lives."

This is where Paul turns into sailing advisor. He warns the centurion that they are way behind schedule, entering into storm season, now stuck behind an island far from the coast. With the likelihood of storms, danger, economic loss, threats to life and limb, wouldn't it be wise to ride out the storm season in a place called "Fair Haven?" That is Paul's question. But remember, he is just a prisoner on a cargo ship. He was not in control, the centurion was in control. And the centurion was not in control of the ship. All he could do is get off and wait it out. But he seemed to be in a hurry. . .

¹¹ But the centurion paid more attention to the pilot and to the owner of the ship than to what Paul said. ¹² And because the harbor was not suitable to spend

the winter in, the majority decided to put out to sea from there, on the chance that somehow they could reach Phoenix, a harbor of Crete, facing both southwest and northwest, and spend the winter there.

So their collective wisdom was to continue the journey along the southern coast of Crete to the far end of the island to a place called Phoenix. “Let’s just make it one step further. We’ll wait out the storm season there.” Right!

Can you see the picture painted here? Paul is simply a prisoner on the way to Rome. But getting to Rome has turned into an adventure, an adventure not of his making, not under his control, being dictated by rather foolish men who are motivated by profit and presumption rather than good common sense. And yet, where is God? Has God abandoned Paul? Not at all. God has His eye on Paul at every step. Can you relate?

II. If we look, we can see God’s hand even in the worst of circumstances. vv. 13-26

It never seems so at the time, in the middle of the storm, but it is true. God has promised never to leave or forsake. There is nowhere you can go and be beyond His protective control. This is where we shift from Paul’s reunion tour, to Gilligan’s Island, to Jonah’s time at sea, only the opposite. I say that because in Jonah’s case, he was running from God, who stopped him by stirring up the sea, which calmed only when Jonah was thrown overboard. With Paul, God was taking him to Rome, he was the precious cargo. He would arrive safely even if the whole ship blew apart. God would deliver his cargo.

¹³ Now when the south wind blew gently, supposing that they had obtained their purpose, they weighed anchor and sailed along Crete, close to the shore.

Instinctively, you know where this is headed. For a few minutes, the seas calm. Now is the time to leave. We'll stay close to the shore...

¹⁴ But soon a tempestuous wind, called the northeaster, struck down from the land. ¹⁵ And when the ship was caught and could not face the wind, we gave way to it and were driven along.

Once more, instead of heading west as was their plan, they are driven by the wind to the south, away from safety, away from land, headed not toward Rome or some safe harbor nearby, but south toward Africa. Simply put, they are now caught in a hurricane.

¹⁶ Running under the lee of a small island called Cauda, we managed with difficulty to secure the ship's boat. ¹⁷ After hoisting it up, they used supports to undergird the ship. Then, fearing that they would run aground on the Syrtis, they lowered the gear, and thus they were driven along.

The situation was bad enough that they had to put ropes under the boat to keep it from splitting apart. They had to move the gear to keep the boat from being top heavy. They were now at the mercy of the storm. They were no longer in control of the ship. Paul was under the control of Julius, who was under the control of the pilot, who was under the control of the boat's owner, who was under the control of the fragile ship, which was under the control of the sea. Can you see the layers of control?

¹⁸ Since we were violently storm-tossed, they began the next day to jettison the cargo. ¹⁹ And on the third day they threw the ship's tackle overboard with their own hands.

Are you catching this? Secure the cargo and equipment, no throw over the cargo, no throw over the equipment used to steer the ship, the rigging for the sails. After three days of the storm, what is left? The battered ship and the people.

²⁰ When neither sun nor stars appeared for many days, and no small tempest lay on us, all hope of our being saved was at last abandoned.

With no way to navigate, they were simply a water soaked, battered cork, bobbing along the waves, waiting for some huge wave to bust up the boat, or some strong wind to crash them onto the rocks. All was now lost, everyone was convinced. They would all die aboard this doomed ship.

²¹ Since they had been without food for a long time, Paul stood up among them and said, "Men, you should have listened to me and not have set sail from Crete and incurred this injury and loss.

I love this detail of "I told you so!" Remember, this is simply a prisoner speaking.

²² Yet now I urge you to take heart, for there will be no loss of life among you, but only of the ship. ²³ For this very night there stood before me an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I worship, ²⁴ and he said, 'Do not be afraid, Paul; you must stand before Caesar. And behold, God has granted you all those who sail with you.' ²⁵ So take heart, men, for I have faith in God that it will be exactly as I have been told. ²⁶ But we must run aground on some island."

If everyone this morning was familiar with this story, I would have simply just preached vv. 20-22, comparing man's fear and God's control. This was no ordinary journey, no routine cargo. This was the man of God's choosing being transported to his next place of ministry. And this is not even the first time Paul has been assured that he will make it to Rome. Back in 23:11, an angel delivered the same message, "Paul, you WILL make it to Rome." Before that, Paul was convinced of his destination of Rome in 19:21. And here, it was told him that not only would HE make it to Rome, but so would everyone aboard his ship. "Yes, yes, our ship will at some point crash and be destroyed, but we will all make it!" Yes, it looked like all was lost: unending hurricane, no food, no way to navigate, broken up ship, but God is with us. He has promised to see us through. We will all arrive at our destination.

As I hope is abundantly clear, we are not done with this story. Indeed, we have two more sermons on it. But even at this point, we ought to experience a sense of relief. This storm is not the judgment of God. He has shown His hand of protection in the midst of the storm. They are not hopelessly lost, they are safe. They will all survive the storm. Indeed, we at this point cannot even imagine how God is going to use this journey. Let's just say there will be some locals who end up thinking Paul must be a god!

But for now, I hope you get the sense that Paul is on a journey, life's journey, filled with ups and downs, sometimes of one's own choosing, sometimes as a

prisoner of fools. And yet, God is in charge, guiding the ship precisely where He plans for it to go. And if God is guiding the ship, should we live in fear?

If we believe this passage is the Word of God, then what should be different about our lives?

- 1) We will not live in fear.
- 2) We will look for God's hand.
- 3) We will enjoy the scenery along the way.
- 4) We will trust God to deliver us safely to our destination.