

Crash Landing

March 15, 2020

Acts 27:27-44

Before I get to my main message this morning, I would like to talk just a bit about this past week and our decision to hold services this morning. As we all know this has been one crazy week. There has certainly been an overreaction to the real health concern over the Corona virus that has plunged our nation into unnecessary steps, like hoarding toilet paper.

My perspective is that the virus is real, the dangers to certain segments of our society is potentially dangerous or even lethal, and the economic and social toll to our nation will be great a long time to come. I understand and wholeheartedly endorse the need to protect the most vulnerable among us. But I also know that in the midst of crisis, it is just as important for the people of God to gather together whenever possible for perspective, support, refocusing, worship, and a sense of normalcy. I envision people gathering to worship on the site of a church blown down by a tornado or burned to the ground. I give such counsel to those who are grieving great loss. Don't try to work through such trauma by isolating yourself from your brothers and sisters, even when you have experienced great tragedy. Allow the body to minister to you. Be a minister to others. In crisis, it is important for us to gather and lean on each other.

So, it is my desire to make this morning as normal as possible, while still taking extra precautions to alleviate people's fears. I'm not going to automatically reach out to shake your hand. I hope we will keep more doors open so we don't all have to touch the handles. In future weeks, we don't know what it will mean for us. We will obey our governing authorities. We will do our best to protect the most vulnerable among us. But if possible, we will continue to meet as we always meet, to help us have a perspective of hope and faith in our Sovereign Lord rather than a perspective of hopelessness and fear based on the latest threat. So, rather than preach a special sermon for the occasion, I am going to preach what I have scheduled to preach from Acts 27.

I've entitled this morning's message, "Crash Landing," referring to the fact that the ship Paul was on traveling to Rome did indeed crash onto a reef along the shore of the island of Malta. But the title brings to mind words of wisdom from my pilot friends, who said, "any landing you walk away from is a good landing."

In this case, it was not a plane but a ship and the landing was on the shore of an island. But the concept is the same. When you walk away alive, you have reason to thank God. Follow along as I read today's text, Acts 27:27-44.
READ.

Main point: Going through crisis tends to bring out the worst and best in all of us.

In fact, many groups (i.e. the military, sports teams, and education) will create crises with the express purpose to expose our flaws and build us up and form bonds that are not easily broken. It seems to me that God does the same thing. He allows crisis into our lives, not to punish us, but to build us up, to expose to us our weaknesses, and to build us up for the future. Indeed, enduring shared crisis tends to build very strong bonds among people, if they indeed go through the crisis together rather than looking out only for themselves. (2 parts)

I. Surviving a crisis is easier if we all stick together. vv. 27-38

Once more, this text is a narrative of what happened in the life of the Apostle Paul. And yet, it comes to us as the Word of God, intended to change our lives, not just give us information. We look at this story, not for information, nor simply for inspiration. We look at this text to see what it teaches us about God, about us, and about what it means for people like us to live in relationship with a God like that and with each other.

Ac 27:27 When the fourteenth night had come, as we were being driven across the Adriatic Sea, about midnight the sailors suspected that they were nearing land. 28 So they took a sounding and found twenty fathoms. A little farther on they took a sounding again and found fifteen fathoms. 29 And fearing that we might run on the rocks, they let down four anchors from the stern and prayed for day to come.

If you remember back to last week, we left Paul and his shipmates adrift in the Mediterranean Sea off the coast of Africa in the midst of a hurricane. All hope was lost, except for a word from God received by Paul that they would all survive the storm. The ship wouldn't survive, but they would. So, after 14 days of enduring such a wild ride, the sailors had the sense they were nearing land. They measured by sound and determined that the water was about 120 feet deep. That seems deep to me, but to them that meant they were probably nearing land. Then, a bit later, they measured again and determined they were in about 90 feet of water. It was midnight, so they could not see, but it made sense to them that land was near. So, they put down anchors to keep them where they were and waited until daybreak so they could see and navigate to shore.

30 And as the sailors were seeking to escape from the ship, and had lowered the ship's boat into the sea under pretense of laying out anchors from the

bow, 31 Paul said to the centurion and the soldiers, “Unless these men stay in the ship, you cannot be saved.”

At the news that land was nearby, there was found to be a division on the ship. It was not “one for all and all for one.” It was the sailors looking out for themselves. I suspect that they had endured enough hurricane and were ready to abandon ship. They were more concerned for their lives than they were their paycheck for completing their journey. I also take from this that there was not enough room on the small boat to hold all of those aboard (276). So these sailors made a deceptive plan to escape by the lifeboat (or dinghy). But before they could execute their plan, Paul (probably warned by God or perhaps just common sense) warned his guards of their plan, telling them that if the sailors leave on the boat, the rest would all die: no lifeboat and no one to steer the ship.

32 Then the soldiers cut away the ropes of the ship’s boat and let it go.

I am intrigued in this story by the guards, especially Julius. As we will see at the end, Julius is mentioned by name doing things to save Paul’s life and here I see the same thing. Did you catch what they did? They cut free the lifeboat so that all aboard were in the same position. The soldiers couldn’t commandeer the boat for themselves. They cut the ropes and set it adrift. There would not be a smaller group that survives at the expense of all the others. They were in this together. It would kind of be like seeing the pilot of your flight jumping out of the plane with a parachute. Unless there are enough parachutes for all, you want that pilot with you, his life dependent on you reaching the ground safely. That is your best hope.

33 As day was about to dawn, Paul urged them all to take some food, saying, “Today is the fourteenth day that you have continued in suspense and without

food, having taken nothing. 34 Therefore I urge you to take some food. For it will give you strength, for not a hair is to perish from the head of any of you.”

In spite of the promise from God for survival (or perhaps because of it!), Paul knows that the people will need all of their strength to make it to shore. Once more, notice there is no tension between human effort and God’s promise. Both are true at the same time. They have gone two weeks without proper food, having been bounced around by the wind and waves, leaving them weak and in no condition to do what would surely be necessary in order to survive. So, taking leadership here, Paul urges the people to eat.

35 And when he had said these things, he took bread, and giving thanks to God in the presence of all he broke it and began to eat. 36 Then they all were encouraged and ate some food themselves. 37 (We were in all 276 persons in the ship.) 38 And when they had eaten enough, they lightened the ship, throwing out the wheat into the sea.

The wording here peaks my interest. It sounds both like the feeding of the 5,000 and like communion. I am confident it is intended to remind us of at least God providing food for His people, and perhaps by miraculous means or even Jesus Himself providing such food. It also presents Paul as serving as pastor to those onboard. He was both leading them and serving them. Here we also find out there were 276 people onboard. That to me is a large number of people. But notice as well that the last of the food was thrown overboard after the meal. The picture painted is that there is nothing left onboard the ship than the people (and the anchors). Cargo? Gone. Tackle? Gone. Lifeboat? Gone. Food? Gone. I don’t think there is anything left! All that is left is the people: 276 people united by crisis, with only some promise from the God of Scripture that they would all make it safely to the shore...

II. Our hope comes from knowing that God will keep His promises. vv. 39-44

This is certainly not just wishful thinking. Too many, too often just wishfully think that they will make it through crisis. Then, when people actually die in such disasters, they lose all hope in God, blaming Him for the loss of life. So, I am not advocating hope by wishful thinking. But I am saying that our best hope comes from God keeping His promises. Right now, I choose to live by such hope, not that God WILL keep me from getting some virus or killed in an accident on the way home. I might indeed go through such a crisis. No, my hope comes from the fact that God is in control, He knows everything about me, loves me, and will be with me to the very end of my life, no matter how soon or far in the future that might be. I have hope that nothing can separate me from His love, and that even death itself cannot separate Him from me. That gives me hope!

In Paul's case, he had heard a direct word from God that he and all his shipmates would make it safely ashore. Here we see how it happened.

39 Now when it was day, they did not recognize the land, but they noticed a bay with a beach, on which they planned if possible to run the ship ashore.

Can you imagine their joy when they spotted land! They didn't know where they were, but they knew there was land and indeed a beach, sand, potentially a soft landing. As we have already seen, seeing land was not enough, it could be lined with rocks, which would tear their ship apart and put them at great risk. I know here in Nebraska we are far from an ocean shoreline, but I trust you have seen enough on TV to know what a rocky shoreline would do to a wooden ship. I admit that one of my favorite places to visit has been the rocky coast of Maine, watching the crashing waves on the rocks. I could watch that for

hours, days without getting bored. But I would not want to be in a boat along such a coast!

40 So they cast off the anchors and left them in the sea, at the same time loosening the ropes that tied the rudders. Then hoisting the foresail to the wind they made for the beach.

Finally, they get to use the wind to their advantage. They have been using anchors to keep them from the effects of the wind, but now they are able to use it for their advantage. Notice they cut free the anchors, leaving even them behind. You might say they are now “all in” on their course of action. They are going to go “ashore” one way or another. They restore the ability to steer the ship, but who knows whether it is now in any condition to actually work. All we know is that they can see land and are heading toward it as quickly as they can.

41 But striking a reef, they ran the vessel aground. The bow stuck and remained immovable, and the stern was being broken up by the surf.

Sure enough, they strike ground, a reef, an underwater obstacle which prevents them from coming closer. Now they are stuck. The wind is pushing them toward shore, but the reef prevents them from proceeding. Meanwhile, the rear of the ship is being battered by the waves. The end of their voyage aboard the ship has come. The ship is breaking up.

42 The soldiers’ plan was to kill the prisoners, lest any should swim away and escape.

As we have discussed before, it was the Roman law that if a prisoner under your charge escapes, you must serve his sentence. Therefore, the soldiers came up with the brilliant idea to kill all of the prisoners rather than have the possibility that any of them escapes. Once more, we see in crisis how “one for all and all for one” is tested in a crisis.

43 But the centurion, wishing 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, 44 and the rest on planks or on pieces of the ship. And so it was that all were brought safely to land.

And, once more, God’s protecting hand shows itself in the form of Julius coming to Paul’s defense. As I said a bit ago, it seems that Julius was impacted by Paul, going above and beyond to show him favor, before in allowing him to go ashore to visit friends and here to save his life. I think the fact that we know Julius’ name is instructive. It wouldn’t surprise me to find out that he was himself a follower of Jesus. Julius’ stature rose in the midst of the crisis.

So the order went out to swim ashore if you can and otherwise cling to a board of the broken up ship to get to shore. Again, picture 276 passengers making such a mad dash to the beach. And then picture the head count of 276 making it ashore safely. God had been true to His promise. Everyone made it safely. The ship did its job and got its cargo safely to shore! It was an ark that kept its people safe until the end, breaking apart at its final resting place.

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

1) We will view crises as times of testing, showing us who we are at our core, exposing our weaknesses and strengths.

2) We will allow God to use such crises to grow us.

3) We will stick together and look out for each other.

4) We will cling to the promises of God.

5) We will hope in the God of the promise.