

“Lost Without a Lifeboat”

Acts 27:21-38

Sermon Series: Summer Getaways Week 11 Paul and a Sea of Uncertainty

The Rev. Dr. Douglas C. Hoglund

The Woodside Church

September 4, 2022

A newspaper of the day called it, “The most unparalleled disaster that ever occurred on the sea.” A luxury steamship plunged to the Atlantic floor taking two thirds of its passengers to a dark grave. No, this is not Titanic. Over half a century before that epic disaster, the opulent *S.S. Central America* was on a return voyage from the gold mines of California. Among the 578 passengers and crew are some who struck it rich in the gold rush. The cargo hold concealed 3 tons of the precious metal. As is true today, September of 1857 is in the middle of hurricane season. Two hundred miles off the coast of Charleston, South Carolina, the *Central America* plows into a tempest with mountain high waves. A massive leak forces all hands on board to bail water for thirty hours. But it is a losing battle.

Eventually, a small brig pulls alongside the doomed liner and takes on women and children first, until it can hold no more. Mary Swan hears her husband say, “Goodbye. I don’t know that I shall ever see you again.” He doesn’t. 153 survive. 425 souls perish. In a desperate, foolish attempt to save their gold, a few toss bags overboard only to see them disappear in the angry, voracious sea. In the end, the most precious possessions are a few scraps of wood for a makeshift raft.¹

What do you do when an unexpected storm rips through your life? A job termination plunges you into a tempest. A discovery of adultery strikes you like a lightning bolt. A thunderclap of cancer shakes you to the bone. A miscarriage engulfs you like a maelstrom. A family argument whips you up in a whirlwind. A financial tsunami knocks you flat. A gale blows through you as you stand by the grave. When a fast moving storm moves across your horizon everything secure is shaken, everything certain is questioned, everything solid is shattered. On Labor Day weekend, hurricanes cause many to flee the shore. But what if you can’t escape your storm? What if you feel like you are lost at sea without a lifeboat?

The Apostle Paul’s life is tempestuous enough. Being unjustly jailed in Caesarea is no balmy spring day. But the weather report is about to turn even more grim. Paul, Luke and Aristarchus are loaded onto a ship by a centurion named Julius with other prisoners, soldiers and sailors. They sail uneventfully up the coast of Palestine to Sidon and across the top of Cyprus to Myra on the mainland. Here, Julius transfers his prisoners and soldiers, 276 persons in all, to a ship transporting grain from Egypt to Rome. Now the winds turn against them. Instead of a shorter course to Greece, they are blown south round the tip of Crete and put in at the harbor of Fair Havens. It is mid fall, when sailors fear to ply the open seas of the Mediterranean. Time for a decision. Despite its name, Fair Havens is not a fair place to find haven through the violent winter storms. Should they stay put or risk a voyage to the more secure harbor of Phoenix on the western tip?

Though a prisoner, Paul is not bashful about giving advice.

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. Acts 27:10

¹ U.S. News and World Report, Sept. 25, 1989, p. 15

Julius the Centurion has grown fond of Paul. His integrity, maturity and godliness distinguish him from the other prisoners. Nevertheless, a Centurion does not take advice from a prisoner. Since the pilot and ship owner are anxious to find a safer dock, they strike out for Phoenix.

It is a disastrous decision. A deceptively gentle south breeze lures them into deeper water. Then it strikes. Every sailor knows the Euraquilo. This notorious nor'easter sweeps down from the island and drives them far out to sea with hurricane force winds. It envelopes them in total darkness for two weeks. No sun to light the way. No stars to steer by at night. Like a tiny cork on an endless violent sea, the ship tosses and rocks, rises and plunges on mountainous waves. Prisoners fearfully rattle their chains. Battle tested soldiers are white as ghosts. Sea-hardened sailors can't keep anything down.

Yet in the raging rise and fall of every wave, Paul stands firm as a rock. He never loses his head. Over the years, he learned: *When a storm changes your course, let Jesus Light your way.* Luke writes,

The ship was caught by the storm and could not head into the wind; so we gave way to it and were driven along...Fearing that they would run aground on the sandbars of Syrtis, they lowered the sea anchor and let the ship be driven along. Acts 27:15, 17b

Your storm will force you to change course. You may have to move, divorce, find work, sell possessions, pay a large debt. There's little you can do to fight it. Digging in your heels, dragging your feet or throwing out an anchor only slows it a bit. Even Paul can't keep the ship on course by praying. Instead, in the dreadful darkness of that nor'easter, he looks for the Light of Jesus. He tells his shipmates,

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. Acts 27:21-26

Sometimes Jesus stills the storm. But most often, He enters the storm to light the way.

Patricia St. John pours out her life ministering to the poorest people on our planet. She was in Sudan when war refugees flooded that country. They suffered terribly and lost everything, yet those among them who were Christians still gave thanks to God. Patricia stood one night in a crowded little Sudanese church listening to those uprooted believers singing joyfully. Suddenly a life-changing insight burned its way into her mind. Despite their circumstances, they were still filled with joy. She realized that God "does not always lift people out of the situation. He Himself comes into the situation . . . He does not pluck them out of the darkness. He becomes the light in the darkness."²

Second, *when storms steal your cargo, let Jesus be your treasure.* Luke remembers,

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. Acts 27:18-19

² Our Daily Bread, August 19, 1997

The only precious freight left is the grain. The owner tries to hold onto this as long as possible. By the dawn of the fifteenth day even the harvest is about to get the heave-ho. But Paul stands again and says,

‘For the last fourteen days 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. Acts 27:33-38

Bread is precious. But more precious by far is the presence of Jesus. This is why Paul uses the bread to share communion with His fellow passengers. The 276 passengers from many faiths, bow their heads, pray and receive the peace of God through the breaking of the bread. Your values change in the middle of storm. It’s said that people fleeing the Titanic ran past thousands of dollars littering the gambling room floors to grab three oranges. Hold on to Jesus. Let Him be your treasure, your lot in life. He’ll give you a lot in the storm.

Third, when a storm divides your crew, let Jesus be the knot that holds you together.

In 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” Acts 27:30-32

Storms can separate a family, break up a business, split up a church, divide a nation. When things look dark, it’s tempting to jump ship. If you are thinking of leaving, hiding, or running from friends and loved ones: DON’T! Paul knows this spells disaster. Pray together. Stay together. Let Jesus be the tie that binds you together, the knot that holds you fast.

Finally, *when the storm crushes your craft, let Jesus bring you safely home.* On the fifteenth day, the storm gives way to a glimmer of dawn. A tiny spit of land appears on the horizon. By now, the creaking, battered hull is tied together with rapidly fraying ropes. Snapping the drag anchors, the sailors hoist the foresail and try to run the boat aground. Miraculously, they avoid the rocks and stick fast in a sandbar. The old barge collapses under the pounding surf. Suddenly, the soldiers unsheathe their knives. It is standard procedure, in such a crisis, to kill all the prisoners. If a soldier fails to prevent an escape, he forfeits his own life. But just as the knife reaches Paul’s neck, Julius the commander cries, ‘Stop!’ He can’t murder the man who courageously kept them from going over the brink. ‘Unlock their shackles. If you can swim, jump overboard and swim to land. The rest grab a plank and float to shore.’ “In this way,” Luke concludes, “everyone reached land in safety” (Acts 27:44). Just as Paul promised, just as God said, all 276 survive.

Sooner or later, your craft will be crushed, your security shattered, your foundation fractured. That’s the moment when you discover Jesus is the only boat that can lead you to safety. When the S.S. *Central America* went to its watery grave, it took more than the 425 lives on board. *America* was in the depths of the Panic of 1857. The financial crisis reached clear across the land. The Panic was caused by over speculation in railroad securities and real estate. When the gold shipment on the *Central America* disappeared beneath the waves, many New York banks were completely ruined. All told, 4,932 companies failed nationwide. One of the greatest mistakes we make in this life is to trust in things and use the Lord. It is better to use things and trust in the Lord.

Under storm shrouded skies, on a creaking deck, in a churning sea, Paul holds on to the one anchor of his soul, the one rudder of his life, the one boat that can take him home: Jesus. His message for you and me as we endure our storms is the same for his shipmates: “Keep up your courage for I have faith in God” (Acts 27:25).

Normally the flight from Nassau to Miami took Walter Wyatt, Jr., only sixty-five minutes. But on December 5, 1986, he attempted it after thieves looted the navigational equipment in his Beechcraft. With only a compass and a hand-held radio, Walter flew into skies blackened by storm clouds. When his compass began to gyrate, Walter concluded he was headed in the wrong direction. He flew his plane below the clouds, hoping to spot something, but soon he knew he was lost. He put out a mayday call. Suddenly Wyatt’s right engine coughed its last and died. The fuel tank had run dry. Around 8 p.m., Wyatt could do little more than glide the plane into the water.

Wyatt survived the crash, but his plane disappeared quickly, leaving him bobbing on the water in a leaky life vest. With blood on his forehead, Wyatt floated on his back. Then he felt a hard bump against his body. A shark found him. Wyatt kicked the intruder and wondered if he would survive the night. He managed to stay afloat for ten hours.

In the morning, Wyatt saw no airplanes, but in the water a dorsal fin was headed for him. Twisting, he felt the hide of a shark brush against him. In a moment, two more bull sharks sliced through the water toward him. Again he kicked the sharks, and they veered away, but he was nearing exhaustion. Then he heard the sound of a distant aircraft. When it was within a half mile, he waved his orange vest. The pilot radioed the *Cape York*, which was twelve minutes away: “Get moving, cutter! There’s a shark targeting this guy!”

As the *Cape York* pulled alongside Wyatt, a Jacob’s ladder dropped over the side. Wyatt climbed wearily out of the water and onto the ship, where he fell to his knees and kissed the deck. He’d been saved. He didn’t need encouragement or better techniques. Nothing less than outside intervention could have rescued him from sure death.³

When you’re lost in a storm, let Him be your lifeboat.

³ Peter Michelmores, Reader’s Digest, October, 1987