

High Seas Expedition

**A Sermon Preached by
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When it was decided that we were to sail for Italy, they transferred Paul and some other prisoners to a centurion of the Augustan Cohort, named Julius. Embarking on a ship of Adramyttium that was about to set sail to the ports along the coast of Asia, we put to sea, accompanied by Aristarchus, a Macedonian from Thessalonica.

The next day we put in at Sidon; and Julius treated Paul kindly, and allowed him to go to his friends to be cared for. Putting out to sea from there, we sailed under the lee of Cyprus, because the winds were against us. After we had sailed across the sea that is off Cilicia and Pamphylia, we came to Myra in Lycia. There the centurion found an Alexandrian ship bound for Italy and put us on board. We sailed slowly for a number of days and arrived with difficulty off Cnidus, and as the wind was against us, we sailed under the lee of Crete off Salmone. Sailing past it with difficulty, we came to a place called Fair Havens, near the city of Lasea.

Since much time had been lost and sailing was now dangerous, because even the Fast had already gone by, Paul advised them, saying, "Sirs, I can see that the voyage will be with danger and much heavy loss, not only of the cargo and the ship, but also of our lives." But the centurion paid more attention to the pilot and to the owner of the ship than to what Paul said. Since the harbor was not suitable for spending the winter, the majority was in favor of putting to sea from there, on the chance that somehow they could reach Phoenix, where they could spend the winter. It was a harbor of Crete, facing southwest and northwest.

When a moderate south wind began to blow, they thought they could achieve their purpose; so they weighed anchor and began to sail past Crete, close to the shore. But soon a violent wind, called the northeaster, rushed down from Crete. Since the ship was caught and could not be turned head-on into the wind, we gave way to it and were driven. By running under the lee of a small island called Cauda we were scarcely able to get the ship's boat under control. After hoisting it up they took measures to undergird the ship; then, fearing that they would run on the Syrtis, they lowered the sea anchor and so were driven. We were being pounded by the storm so violently that on the next day they began to throw the cargo overboard, and on the third day with their own hands they threw the ship's tackle overboard.

When neither sun nor stars appeared for many days, and no small tempest raged, all hope of our being saved was at last abandoned. Since they had been without food for a long time, Paul then stood up among them and said, "Men, you should have listened to me and not have set sail from Crete and thereby avoided this damage and loss. I urge you now to keep up your courage, for there will be no loss of life among you, but only of the ship. For last night there stood by me an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I worship, and he said, 'Do not be afraid, Paul; you must stand before the emperor; and indeed, God has granted safety to all those who are sailing with you.' So keep up your courage, men, for I have faith in God that it will be exactly as I have been told. But we will have to run aground on some island."

When the fourteenth night had come, as we were drifting across the sea of Adria, about midnight the sailors suspected that they were nearing land. So they took soundings and found twenty fathoms; a little farther on they took soundings again and found fifteen fathoms. Fearing that we might run on the rocks, they let down four anchors from the stern and prayed for day to come. But when the sailors tried to escape from the ship and had lowered the boat into the sea, on the pretext of putting out anchors from the bow, Paul said to the centurion and the soldiers, "Unless these men stay in the ship, you cannot be

saved." Then the soldiers cut away the ropes of the boat and set it adrift.

Just before daybreak, Paul urged all of them to take some food, saying, "Today is the fourteenth day that you have been in suspense and remaining without food, having eaten nothing. Therefore I urge you to take some food, for it will help you survive; for none of you will lose a hair from your heads." After he had said this, he took bread; and giving thanks to God in the presence of all, he broke it and began to eat. Then all of them were encouraged and took food for themselves. (We were in all two hundred seventy-six persons in the ship.)

After they had satisfied their hunger, they lightened the ship by throwing the wheat into the sea. In the morning they did not recognize the land, but they noticed a bay with a beach, on which they planned to run the ship ashore, if they could. So they cast off the anchors and left them in the sea. At the same time they loosened the ropes that tied the steering-oars; then hoisting the foresail to the wind, they made for the beach. But striking a reef, they ran the ship aground; the bow stuck and remained immovable, but the stern was being broken up by the force of the waves. The soldiers' plan was to kill the prisoners, so that none might swim away and escape; 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, and the rest to follow, some on planks and others on pieces of the ship. And so it was that all were brought safely to land.

Acts 27 NRSV

“All were brought safely to land....” Isn’t that what we want when we’re navigating the storms of life? We just want to get to the shore in one piece. Paul’s story of survival at sea tells us something about how we make that happen. But if we’re going to discover for ourselves the secret of safe sailing through life we have to look at Paul’s story a little more closely.

How many of us have ever been on a pleasure cruise – whether for a few hours or a few days? Lots of us. These days, crossing the ocean in a ship or floating down a river in an old-time paddle boat is seen as the height

of luxury; it's something that people do just for fun. Up until about 150 years ago, people didn't think this way. And in *Jesus'* day people thought *very* differently about sea travel. This was long before weather forecasts and life preservers, radios or even swimming lessons. In those days if a boat went down it meant almost certain death. No one was coming to rescue anyone.

To make things worse, the sea itself was barely understood. We know more about *outer space* than they knew about life just a few feet below the water's surface. To them the sea was a mystery to be feared, not a new world to be explored. To most people it represented chaos and danger, the home of underworld gods, or worse. The Old Testament even has several references to sea monsters, which tells you how afraid they were of what might dwell down below. (Gen 1:21; Ps 148:7) This fear carried into the middle ages when long distance voyages first became common:



Even by the 19th century, when the fear of *mythical* sea monsters was largely gone, there was still a legitimate fear of *real* ones in the form of rogue whales. You may know that *Moby Dick* was based on a true story of a high seas expedition gone horribly bad.



We like to think of ourselves as much more sophisticated in 2010, don't we? As if we have mastered the deep and all that is in it. But we

know that there are forms of life down there that may yet possess the power to destroy us. There are all kinds of theories about what caused the BP oil spill, but I have my own idea of the culprit:



Spongebob Squarepants: Scourge of parents everywhere.

Now we can understand why people sailed only reluctantly in Jesus' day and why, when they did set sail, they stayed as close to the shore as possible. Paul did not undertake his voyage voluntarily; he had no death wish. He was a prisoner being taken to Rome to be tried before the emperor. His trip reminds us that there are plenty of times in life that we have to go places we'd rather avoid or do things we'd rather not – and we need God as much in those times as in any other.

Are you on a journey of sorts today? Navigating a difficult pregnancy? Drifting into retirement? Cruising through middle age? Tossing and turning in a storm of health issues? Sailing from 9th to 10th grade? I bet we're all in transition somehow, getting from one place, or age, or relationship, to another. And it probably feels a little dangerous, a little risky, like you're going to be seasick if you're not on solid ground again soon. I bet that that's how Paul felt, despite all his faith, when he was crossing the Mediterranean Sea almost 2000 years ago.

That's why every boat in those days had an anchor. If you've ever sailed a sunfish or gone fishing in a rowboat you know how helpful an anchor is. Up until I studied this passage I thought the purpose of an anchor was to keep you in one place so that you could fish or eat your lunch where you wanted to. For sure, that is one purpose of an anchor, but when it comes to large boats or rough seas, anchors are really a *safety* device. Properly used, they keep the boat or ship from drifting so close to the rocky shore that it smashes to bits against them.

Fishermen with smaller boats, like the kind the disciples used on the Sea of Galilee, used anchors like these:



They were hewn from stone and a rope would have been tied around their mid-section so they could be lowered and retrieved easily.

Large ships, like the one that Paul was on – remember it held 267 people -- had anchors made of metal and wood, much like the ones we are used to seeing today. These anchors were discovered in the Mediterranean not too long ago.



They date from the first century.

We know from our Lesson that there came a point in the storm when the sailors cut loose the anchors so the boat could drift safely to shore. Some scholars have used Luke's detailed account in the Book of Acts to try to locate the lost anchors from Paul's ship. One scholar in particular thinks he has found them:



www.bobcornuke.com/content/pauls-shipwreck

Whether these are the metal stocks from the anchors on Paul's ship or not, doesn't really matter to our faith. What does matter is what the anchor represented to Christians in Paul's day and what the anchor represents for us as Christians today.

In the Letter to the Hebrews Jesus is described as the anchor of our faith. The author warns against drifting away from God's teachings (remember if we're drifting *from* God, we're drifting *toward* something else that isn't God – we better watch out—and stop. (Hebrews 2:1) Then the author of that letter goes on to say that in Jesus "We have ... a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul." (Hebrews 6:19) When we're facing storms in life, Jesus is the anchor that can keep us from getting crushed on the rocks.

That's one of the reasons that in the early days of the church, Christians marked their meeting places and burial sites not with crosses, but with anchors:



Anchor, IV sec. d.c., Catacomb of Priscilla, via Salaria Nova, Roma



Catacombs of St. Sebastian, Rome

These stone carvings were taken off walls of catacombs in Rome, where Paul was headed on his fateful journey.



Christian Roman epitaph of Atimetus from the catacombs of St. Sebastian on the Via Appia, Rome. Inscription flanked by Christian symbols, an anchor and a fish.

These crude inscriptions must have been a source of great hope to Christians facing hardship and persecution for their faith. Seeing the anchor reminded them to hold fast to Christ – the only One who could keep them steady during the deadly storms swirling around them.

Now what would you say was the secret to the survival of the 276 people on board Paul’s boat? It’s pretty simple. They all stayed in the boat. Paul warned them, *"Unless [you] stay in the ship, you cannot be saved."* This seems like sound advice to us, because we know how the story ends. But if you put yourself in the perspective of the sailors and passengers it doesn’t seem to make any sense at all.

The captain and crew were ready to abandon ship, the passengers wanted to get off, too. No one really seemed to know what to do, except Paul, and he was a land-loving Pharisee turned tent-maker turned prisoner – not exactly someone I’d trust with my life. The storm was tossing the ship around and the rocks were getting closer with every wave. Everything inside them said, *"Abandon ship now, while there’s still hope."*

It’s that way with the church, too, sometimes. Sometimes church leaders will let you down or cause you to lose faith, and you might consider leaving. Sometimes it probably seems like your church leaders don’t know what they are doing, and you may want to pull your support. Sometimes you see how cultural storms and petty politics are battering the church on every side and – and even from within. At times it probably feels like we’re drifting or have lost direction. So it would be understandable if you found yourself looking around for the nearest life boat, just in case.

But like St. Paul, I'm urging you to stay with the ship – no matter what. Remember how God saved Noah's family by putting them on the Ark? It was probably loud, crowded, and stinky on the ark. There were probably times when Noah's family was ready to mutiny. But at least they all had enough common sense to know that as bad as things were *inside* the Ark, they didn't have a prayer treading water *outside* of it. It's the same with the church. For all the flaws we have – and let's be honest, we have them – the church is our best hope of making it safely to land.

When the first Christians wanted to depict the church in art, they used a ship to do it. These drawings are from gravestones in Rome.



Gravestone of Firmia Victora, Museo Pio Cristiano, Vatican, Rome

They took literally Paul's warning that leaving the ship would only lead to the bottom of the sea.

In the years since, many congregations have worked ship imagery into their stained glass,



their sanctuary décor,



and even their architecture. Kari and I honeymooned in Aruba and on the Sunday that we were there we worshipped with a Dutch Reformed congregation. Their building was a perfect match of architecture and island. The ceiling over the nave – which is the fancy word for where the people sit – was made of curved beams covered with wood planks carefully joined together to look like the upside down hull of a fishing boat. [Note: the word “nave” comes from the Latin word “navis” – for “ship.”] The pulpit was designed specially, too. The front of it came to a point just like the bow of a boat. In that sanctuary you couldn’t help but be reminded that the church is like a boat, carrying people through the most threatening storms.

Too many of us try to go it alone. Too many Christians have bought into a kind of “me and Jesus” theology, as if that’s all we need. Yes, Jesus is all we need, but it’s the church who helps us experience Jesus today. Think of it this way: anchors are important, but if I’m drowning, please don’t throw me an anchor; instead, pull me into the boat. Yes, the church is creaky, old, and has a few leaks, but it’s still God’s plan for bringing people safely to the shore.

If you feel this morning like a person who has been on a cruise for one too many days. If you’re tired of conforming. Tired of the discipline. Tired of the cost of discipleship. If you’re ready to jump ship and set out on our own, thinking “I don’t need the church...” All I can say is, “Don’t do it.” I’m not saying you can’t make it on your own. I *am* saying, God has promised to bring us all safely to shore. Why take a chance with your one and only life?

When the seas of life turn stormy, no matter how bleak things look, hold fast to the anchor of our hope – Jesus Christ -- and take refuge in the floating sanctuary that is his church. Amen.

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