

Weathering the Storm

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Acts 27:13-25

Sermon Series:
God's Big Story

*...how can
your story
become part of
God's Big
Story?*

Our church staff had a little heart-to-heart about our church in 2008. We lamented that people don't know God's Big Story. Many of us regard the Bible as a collection of little stories, each containing a moral lesson rather than a big story about God. So, in September 2008, we embarked on a sermon series on God's Big Story. We introduced this story with three words: Creation—God created us for relationship. That's why we're made—to live in relationship with God and each other. Fall—we have fallen out of relationship with God and each other through something called sin. Redemption—God will stop at nothing, not even the death of his Son, to redeem us back into relationship with God. As we sometimes say, "God Creates, Sin Destroys, God Restores." Someone called recently to ask me why we talk so much about Jesus in this church. I answered that we talk about Jesus so much because he is the means by which God redeems people back into relationship.

We told God's Big Story for nine months. Our staff came back together and we asked ourselves, now what do we do? Since God's Big Story doesn't end with Jesus but continues in his early disciples, we decided to preach our way

through Acts. So, in May 2009, we began a sermon series on Acts—28 sermons over 28 Sundays. We asked you to consider how your story can become part of God's Big Story.

I've preached my share of sermons on the first half of Acts. But I've never in 30 years preached a single sermon from the last third of Acts—on Paul's arrest and subsequent trials. I regarded it as a matter of important Biblical record, yet I minimized its value in preaching.

I'm not alone in this neglect. *The Revised Common Lectionary*, a suggested list of Bible readings for each Sunday in a three-year cycle, offers no readings for any passage after Acts 19. If you come from a tradition utilizing the *Common Lectionary*, you never heard a single sermon from Acts 19-28.

I've fallen in love with the last third of Acts. Some treasures of Scripture lie right on the surface, there for the taking. Other gems of biblical wisdom must be hunted down and uncovered.

When I opened to Acts 27 this week to prepare for this sermon, my first reaction was—I'm doomed. There's nothing here to preach on this week. I couldn't explain why Luke spills so much ink on Paul's voyage to Rome. Maybe he inserts it for entertainment value; you know, a little high adventure on the

A transformation story—from despised prisoner...to designated leader.

open seas. I don't think so. Luke has other purposes in mind. But first the story:

Paul appears before King Agrippa in Acts 26. Paul does not expect a fair trial in Jerusalem, so he appeals to the Roman emperor. He is assigned a soldier named Julius to escort him to Rome (27:1). Since there are no cruise ships headed to Rome, Paul and Julius book passage on a cargo vessel (27:8).

We learn in verse 9 that “the Fast” has already come and gone. Fast is another name for Yom Kippur, which falls every year between mid-September and early October. The Mediterranean was essentially closed for sailing November through March. September and October were considered hazardous months for sailing. Their expedition reaches the port of Fair Havens (27:8). Paul advises Julius and the crew to winter there, but the pilot and the owner have financial incentives to keep going. The emperor has offered extra bounty for ships that bring much needed grain from Egypt during the perilous sailing season. So they press on toward Phoenix, 476 miles away.

In the midst of their trip, “a northeaster” strikes (27:14). We called them nor'easters in Boston. The winds from the northeast would combine with moisture moving up the eastern coast to create hurricane force conditions. While we were living in Boston, one nor'easter hit on Feb. 5, 1978, dumping heavy snow for a full 33 hours, accumulating 28 inches.

The snow came so quick and heavy that motorists had to be evacuated with snowmobiles on interstates.

The sailors take all the necessary precautions. They hoist the lifeboat (27:16) and lash down the bow and stern with ropes, called frapping, to hold the ship together (27:17). They let down the anchor as a brake and throw cargo and tackle overboard (27:18). The sun and stars are not seen in the sky for days on end, rendering their navigation equipment useless (27:19). The unpredictable sandbars of Syrtis loom nearby. According to Josephus, the first century historian, the sandbars of Syrtis would strike terror into the heart of any accomplished sailor.

Paul could not resist a little “I told you so” dig in verse 21. “Men, you should have listened to me.” Then he announces God's decree that there will be no loss of life. The ship may go down, but no one will be lost (27:22).

After 14 days of being buffeted by this nor'easter, sailors on the midnight watch sense approaching land (27:27). Most likely they hear the surf crashing on the shore. They take soundings to verify their course. They're heading straight for shore. Some attempt to mutiny the ship, but Paul restrains them (27:30-32). The sailors attempt to lighten the ship to ride higher in the water, but the ship hits a sandbar and runs aground. The soldiers contemplate killing the prisoners on board to save their lives, but Paul talks them out of it. Paul gives the order to abandon ship. Everyone makes it safely to shore. Several

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months later, Paul arrives safely in Rome.

At the outset of Acts 27, Paul is a despised prisoner. Yet, by chapter's end, he has become their designated leader. His ability to lead in a crisis vaults him to the forefront. (Those of you who have just been ordained to leadership in this church, I hope you're listening!)

So what? So what difference does Acts 27 and this sermon make in my life? Let's take a step back to look again at God's Big Story in Acts. By the middle of Acts, Paul receives a premonition that God wants him in Jerusalem. Paul senses the Spirit's leading him to go there (20:22). So he goes and is promptly arrested. We read of a plot to assassinate him. He is transferred to Caesarea, where he languishes in jail for two years. The Lord appears to Paul in jail, "Keep up your courage! As you have testified for me in Jerusalem, so you must bear witness also in Rome (23:11). So he goes to Rome. It takes him six months to get there. He nearly drowns in the process and is poisoned by the venom of a deadly snake. When he arrives in Rome, he is immediately placed under house arrest for two years.

Christians often imagine following Christ to be a life of smooth sailing and calm seas. There are, of course, wonderful stretches of blue sky and easy sailing. Thank God for days when the breezes are gentle and the sun is warm on our shoulders.

But the storms of life come and go. You may be coming out of a storm right now or about to head into one. Jesus told would-be followers, "In this world you will have trouble" (John 16:33). You can count on it. We cannot prevent storms from coming into our lives, but we can batten down the hatches and hang on to God for dear life. It has been said, "You can't direct the wind, but you can adjust your sails."

Why doesn't God calm this storm? Why doesn't Jesus make a cameo appearance, walk on the water and command the wind and the waves to be still? That would make for a more dramatic ending.

The lyrics of a popular Christian song come to mind:

Sometimes he calms the sea
With a whispered "Peace be still"
He can settle any sea
But it doesn't mean he will
Sometimes he holds us close
And lets the wind and waves go wild
Sometimes he calms the storm
And other times he calms the child.

Paul certainly makes the most of his five-year incarceration and trial. He writes letters in prison that survive to this day. They're called prison epistles for the simple reason that Paul writes them in jail. The New Testament letters of Ephesians, Philemon, Philippians and Colossians come to us in this way. We'll be preaching a sermon series from one of these prison epistles, Colossians, beginning in January.

Paul testifies to his faith in prison. He witnesses to people in

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high places—governors, kings, even despots like Nero. He witnesses to sailors and soldiers alike. Paul takes Jesus' words to heart: "You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8).

When the storm is fiercest and the ship looks like it is about to go down, "Paul takes bread, gives thanks in the presence of all, breaks it and begins to eat" (27:35). How could Paul be thinking about eating at a time like this? The language of giving thanks and breaking bread sounds remarkably similar to Jesus' words at the Last Supper when he readies to enter the eye of the storm.

Paul's approach of giving thanks in the good times and the bad times reminds me of America's first Thanksgiving. The year 1620 had been horrible for the Pilgrims. They landed at Plymouth Plantation in November, too late for planting crops. The first winter half of them died. Since most of them were escaping religious persecution and ignorant in farming, they were guided through the next growing season by a Native American named Squanto. The 53 surviving pilgrims successfully harvested crops to sustain them for the coming winter. To celebrate, Governor Bradford ordered a harvest festival of three days. The feast included wild turkey from the countryside and shellfish from the bay. The Pilgrims invited the local Wampanoag people to the festival and 90 of them came.

The festival was repeated a few years later. It began as a fast for rain. When the much needed rains came, the fast became a feast of Thanksgiving. One hundred and fifty years later, in the War for American Independence, the Continental Congress called for a day of Thanksgiving in October 1777. President Lincoln proclaimed a National Day of Thanksgiving in November 1863.

Thanksgiving reminds us to give thanks, not just for the gifts that bless our lives but for God's sustenance through the losses as well. The first Thanksgiving festival followed a devastating winter. The Continental Congress called for Thanksgiving in the midst of war. Abraham Lincoln proclaimed a national holiday when America was being torn asunder in the war between the states.

There might be at your Thanksgiving this year little ones sitting up to the table for the first time, just as there are also empty places at the table. There are other losses, strained relationships, failed enterprises, the toll of age and illness. We don't give thanks for pain and heartache; we give thanks for God's abiding presence.

