

**Stormy Seas**  
**Acts 27**  
**June 4, 2023**

### **Epic Sea Tales**

Be honest - how many of you knew that there was an epic shipwreck story in the book of Acts? Don't feel badly - it was a seminary discovery for me - it's simply not a story we read very often - which is unfortunate because there is a long tradition of treacherous sea journeys in literature that invite us into broader ways of thinking about the adventurous nature of life lived as an ongoing journey of growth and discovery. One thinks of the Odyssey or even Jonah - I spent some time re-looking at *The Tempest* this week. The sea is all at once a source of life and of death - a place of peace and also of terror. Like the winds in the storm, these stories stir up fear and anticipation and heroism and faith and change. And at their best, they invite us to see ourselves in them.

### **Series Re-Cap**

Over the last few weeks, during our Building Blocks worship series, we have been exploring how the early church - the one we see in the book of Acts continued to learn and grow as the Holy Spirit moved among them. Rather than seeing the church as fully formed from the beginning - we have discovered over and over again how the church then and now must continue to figure it out.

We began with Jesus' ascension and the apprehension of the disciples as his mission becomes their mission. But Jesus' departure comes with a promise - that the Spirit will be with them - They are not alone. And then the Spirit did come in Acts 2, like a wind and like flames. And the miracle of Pentecost became a group of diverse people from all over the world listening to one another - truly listening in order to understand - such that the church is birthed in listening. Which led us to a vision of community where we invest in one another - sharing our lives - sharing who we are - with one another. In the work of sharing, the church grows. And it gets too large for the apostles to see and meet the needs of everyone. And so they make some course corrections. They elected deacons - they spread out the ministry - recognizing that a diverse set of leaders can see people and needs that may get missed if we all look and think the same. And last week the Spirit invited us to embrace curiosity. The church had to unlearn some of what it thought it knew in order to be faithful - a truth that rings just as clearly now as it did then. The spirit continues to call us out beyond ourselves - out into more welcome and more growth.

The story of Acts has been the unfolding story of a community. Luke, as the author, has always had an eye on the community of faith and how it moves from the small group afraid and hiding in Jerusalem out to Judea and Samaria and the end of the earth. In many ways Rome becomes the end of the earth in Luke's story. And today we have the treacherous journey to get there during which we see an unlikely community where the lives of each one depend on the survival or salvation of everyone.

### **Lives are connected**

Paul, who is perhaps the most outspoken prisoner in history, warns everyone that the season for sailing has passed and they ought not set out. But the sailors think they can make it and so off they go. Of course they are caught up in a terrible storm and things look bleak for days. Now there are 3 distinct groups on board. There are prisoners, like Paul - who are clearly the most vulnerable. There are the soldiers who are bound by a sense of duty to not let the prisoners escape - even suggesting at one point that they should just kill all the prisoners rather than risk them escaping. And there are the sailors - who illustrate an "every one for themselves" attitude - at one point trying to abandon ship under the guise of checking the depth of the water.

But Paul's consistent message is that they must make it together. Salvation is found in making sure no one is left behind.

It can be a challenge for the modern church to think in similar ways. In a culture where the message and mission of Jesus gets reduced to personal salvation wrapped up in where am I gonna go when I die - this story counters this individualized image of faith - forcing us to recognize the ways that our lives are connected - and so our liberation and freedom and salvation are caught up in the liberation, freedom, and salvation of the most vulnerable around us. We cannot have one without the other.

### **Stormy Seas for us**

There is no shortage of proverbial stormy weather surrounding the church these days. You can insert your own crisis depending on what causes you the most anxiety - deep seeded division, declining commitment to institutions, difficulty finding common ground, increased pressures around work/life balance...the list is long when it comes to the things that make us feel like we are adrift or unmoored.

And in those moments, the temptation to look out only for ourselves or to hold so tightly to a sense of duty that we fail to see the people around us, can make us behave like the soldiers and the sailors on the ship with Paul. We need the reminder again and again that none of us really make it unless all of us do.

### **Church breaks bread**

The most striking scene in this shipwreck story to me, is perhaps the confidence and hope of Paul, who in the midst of the storm - and in preparation to let go of control of the ship and allow the wind to blow them into the shore - Paul takes bread - breaks it - blesses it and shares it with the community. The early readers would not have missed this reference to the last supper - the act of taking communion together.

For me, it reflects a deep understanding of what can be controlled and what cannot. The group is about to loosen the rudder - letting go of the ability to steer in the hopes of not damaging the rudder for later. They will cut the anchors that hold them fast to what they know. And they will raise a sail in the storm, and allow the wind to blow where it will. They cannot control the storm and they know it. So they control what they can - they control who they are in the midst of stress and fear.

They return to bread. Simple, real and symbolic nourishment. They share it with each other - making sure everyone gets some. And in that act they remember that they belong to each other and to God. It is an image of church that serves us well. We belong to one another and to God. No matter what comes - no matter the storm - no matter what we have to figure out next. We belong to one another and to God. May it be so. Amen.

### **Epilogue**

Paul's shipwreck is not the ending of the book of Acts - Paul does eventually make it to Rome, but the meeting with Caesar - the event to which the last several chapters have been building, doesn't get recorded. Instead, the book ends with Paul spending two years proclaiming the Kingdom of God to any who welcome the news - to Jew and Gentile alike. Acts 28 reads:

*When we came into Rome, Paul was allowed to live by himself, with the soldier who was guarding him....He lived there two whole years at his own expense and welcomed all who came to him, proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance.*

It feels unfinished. Like this couldn't possibly be the end. Luke has been such an intentional writer throughout, it is hard to imagine he would just stop - unless he means for the story to be unfinished. For it to still be unfolding 2000 years later. For the church to still be building itself brick by brick and person by person. For the Spirit to still be moving and us to still be learning and growing. The story is unfinished - we are continuing it, even now. We are the ones figuring it out.

William Willimon writes: You and I live in the continuation of the story of Acts. Acts must close in an open ended fashion, with the door still open for work and witness rather than closed by death, because the Spirit is still active. Luke is not simply writing history. He writes the story of the Spirit, the Spirit incarnate in people like you and me.

So, go - be the church - empowered by the Spirit, held in the love of God and each other, go tell your stories, serve those around you and grow. Amen