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**SHIPWRECKED FAITH**  
**ACTS 27:9-26, 39-44**  
**A SERMON PREACHED IN DUKE UNIVERSITY CHAPEL**  
**ON SUNDAY, AUGUST 14, 2022**  
**BY THE REV. BRUCE PUCKETT**

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Acts has told an incredible story of the birth and expansion of the church, as the fire of the Spirit set ablaze on those early followers of Jesus spread boundlessly. Acts has told us stories of how in the heat of the Spirit's fire, outsiders came to be insiders and the unclean or unworthy have taken their place at the table of God's grace. Acts has given us a window into a world of faithful pursuit of Jesus and his ways that have led some, like Steven, to martyrs' deaths as they proclaimed Jesus's message. And Acts has shown us the surprising reversal for persecutors of Jesus's community who encountered the great light of Christ and turned to be passionate proclaimers of the faithfulness of Jesus. What an amazing, surprising, liberating, compelling, and Spirit-filled story Acts has told.

And now we've come to the end of this book, and I don't know about you, but I'm ready for a tidy conclusion. I want this story of the early church to end with peace and love reigning, with the message of Jesus's grace grabbing hold of people near and far and changing their lives for good. I want the end of this book to be sunshine and rainbows and warm hugs. But that isn't where we find ourselves with one chapter remaining in the story of Acts. In fact, if we are looking for a traditional success story, a triumphant end, a climatic reign of Christ on earth through the church, we have come to the wrong place and read the wrong story.

Here we are in chapter 27 of Acts with Paul in custody making his way to yet another trial. Paul, the persecutor turned proclaimer of Jesus, the one who is in no small way responsible for the great spread of the Jesus's message to the gentiles, is not being celebrated as a saintly hero or traveling with his holy entourage in a victory parade. No, he's being taken as a prisoner to Rome to be tried by the emperor. Time and again throughout Acts, Paul and other Christ followers like him have been put on trial for their faith. They have been tested in the waters of persecution and hardship. They have been imprisoned, beaten, and told to be silent. Nevertheless, by the Spirit, the message of Christ has been spreading and drawing people into the way of Jesus. And while chains and prison gates have not stopped the movement of the Spirit thus far, perhaps by the end of the book, it seems reasonable to think something better than being a prisoner is in store.

If I were Paul, I surely would have been expecting something different at this point. I know the conversation I would be having with God in my mind. "Alright, God, I've been through it for you. Because you knocked me to my knees with the light and truth of your love, I've traveled near and far. I've given up the comforts of my status as a religious elite and a Roman citizen. I've shared your message, and it has cost me! I've been beaten within an inch of my life, not just once but multiple times. I've been imprisoned almost more times than I can count. So what's my reward? Where's the celebration? Where's the benefits package? Where's the retirement plan where I spend my days fishing, playing golf, and being invited to share my story as a celebrity guest?"

Apparently, that wasn't Paul's thinking, at least not as Acts tells it. Acts instead tells a story of Paul travelling as a prisoner among prisoners on a cargo ship sailing at a risky time. The text tells us that from the beginning of this journey everyone knew it was going to be dangerous. The Day of Atonement, which happens in September or October, had already passed, and sailing after that was not wise because the weather was unfavorable. Imagine setting sail in the heart of hurricane season without any radars to know what storms were brewing but knowing that it was hurricane season. In fact, only those who were brave, or fool-hardy, or seeking the hefty monetary reward that comes with carrying cargo on the seas would ever sail during this time. You know the saying, "Red in the morning sailors take warning." Apparently, these sailors see red and say, "Let's go!"

Paul was certain this was a bad idea. He warned the centurion who was taking him to Rome and the sailors against making this trip. "Sirs, I can see that the voyage will be with danger and much heavy loss, not only of cargo and the ship, but also of our lives." Unfortunately for those traveling on the ship, this ends up being a prophetic word—telling of a future that was awaiting them. In what must have been one of the worst decisions recorded in

Acts, the centurion ignored Paul's warning and listened to the pilot, the owner of the ship, and ultimately the majority who decided it was better to set sail than to stay at the harbor. Paul's cautionary word was ignored.

Paul's warning about the dangers they would face was both rooted in a common wisdom and a Spirit-inspired guidance. "Hold up! There's danger ahead. Sure, you stand to make a fortune, but it's not worth it. It will cost you everything." How many times in our lives have we encountered warnings like this one? Warnings perhaps rooted in a practical and spiritual wisdom. Maybe the warnings for you have come from a friend, a trusted mentor, a coworker, a person at church, or perhaps even someone you don't much like. Maybe the warnings have just been a gut feeling, a prick of your conscience, or a thought you've had? Nevertheless, you've recognized the warning: There's danger ahead. Don't do it. Perhaps the warnings have been common and apply to most everyone: Don't steal that money, don't tell that lie, don't spread that story about your neighbor, don't laugh at that demeaning comment, don't plagiarize that paper, don't visit that website... don't do these things because the natural consequences of them are destructive. These warnings say, if you follow this course of action, the possibility of running into a storm is strong. To do these kinds of things is so often to head straight into a storm that can wreck your life.

Sometimes, though, the warnings are less common, more directly personal, and yet nevertheless clear to you. They are things like: Don't go to that school. Don't take that job. Don't enter that relationship. Don't stay in the relationship. Don't move there. Don't pick up the bottle again. Don't give up on that person. Don't, well, you know what you've heard. These warnings come with a sense that the storm could be avoided if you would just give heed to them.

There is much grace and care in these warnings. The "don'ts" we receive from God are not because God is some divine killjoy—wanting to ruin all our fun or adventure. The "don'ts" are gifts of God's love for us, boundaries for our betterment. There is so much grace in the warnings not to do certain things because the warnings remind us that sometimes the storms of life can be avoided. Don't get me wrong, I'm not saying they all can. And I'm not saying that every storm we encounter is because of our own disobedience, decisions, or doings. After all, Paul ends up in the middle of a storm because of the choices of others. But I am saying that it is in God's character at times to guide us around trouble, warn us of danger, and call for obedience as a way to avoid the wreckage. Sometimes as Rev. Crowder-Stanley reminded us last week, instead of walking the road with the hole in it, we can take another road all together. At times, there is deliverance for us from the storm.

And at other times, God's deliverance comes through the storm and amidst the wreckage. The story in Acts continues with the men on the ship encountering a mild wind and hoping that the purposes of their trip would be accomplished. I can almost see the men taking a deep breath of relief when the first winds were just small gusts. But before long, the winds moved from mild, to moderate, to strong, to hurricane force. Soon the sailors recognized there was no fighting the storm, they just had to give way to it. They tried everything they knew to do to protect themselves and the ship, but the storm was relentless. They even wrapped the boat in ropes to hold it together. Acts says that they were being pounded so violently from the storm that they threw the cargo overboard. The fear and panic must have been great for the crew to abandon their chance for a payday at the end of the voyage. Their precious cargo represented their livelihood and their futures. Yet that wasn't all the abandoning they would have to do. After a few more days, they even gave up on the tools they needed to sail the ship. They threw the ship's tackle overboard. This was a steady stripping away of their resources and their own ways of surviving. They had not seen the stars or the sun for days, which meant they had no bearing of where they were and the future was bleak. If hope floats, the men didn't know it because before long, they even tossed their hopes of being saved over the side of the ship.

Precisely when all hope seemed lost, Paul spoke again. This time instead of offering a word of warning, Paul offered a word of hope. In the middle of the storm, Paul had been with God. While the crew abandoned cargo and tackle and hope, Paul consulted with the God who made the seas and whose plans would not be thwarted by any storms, and he found encouragement there. The circumstances for Paul were the same as they were for the others, but instead of fear, Paul experienced faith. Paul's faith was one that had been through trouble and trial and hardship

before, so he had a confidence and trust in the God on whom his faith relied. Paul didn't put-on rose-colored glasses. His faith and hope were not Pollyanna. His faith was a shipwrecked faith. In faith, Paul trusted that just as much as it is in God's character to offer ways for us to avoid the storm, it is also in God's character to be with us in the middle of the storm and save us through it. Paul trusted that God's plans and purposes for salvation would not be stopped even when everything was a wreck.

When there is no light to see the way, when there is no hope of holding it all together, when the ship of life is breaking apart and you can't swim, God's salvation story for you is not over. God's rescue plan for you won't finally be disrupted by your bad choices or disobedience or failures or even those of others. Now there might be great loss. In fact, there likely will be. You might have to abandon everything you hold dear, everything that you think will protect you through the storm and get you back to safety, but God has not and will not abandon you. Perhaps today you've run aground... your life is a wreck... everything you've held as valuable, everything you've prioritized, everything that meant anything to you is already gone, thrown overboard, or breaking apart, and you're clinging to the wreckage just hoping to make it safely to shore. Well, I came today to say with brother Paul and the story-teller of Acts, God has not abandoned you there. Your salvation and rescue are not dependent on the sum of your choices or actions. I don't know what storms seem to be destroying your life, and I don't know if the storms have been made more challenging by your choices or those of others. But what I do know, and the good news in Christ is, there is hope amidst the storm and there is faith through and on the other side of the shipwrecks of life.

With his encouragement that they would not lose their lives in the storm, Paul encouraged the men to eat. Paul invited the men with their stomachs still queasy from the storm to dine at the table. He offered them a thanksgiving meal. He offered them life and sustenance and faith as if he were a pastor serving the body and blood of Jesus at the communion table. Acts tells us, after Paul invited the men to eat, he took bread, gave thanks to God, broke the bread, and shared a meal. The meal served as confirmation that God's faithful saving presence was there amidst the storm, amidst the wreckage, amidst the loss.

Today we come to this table to share a meal that gives us sustenance in the middle of whatever storms we are experiencing. This table and this meal serve as confirmation that God is with us, providing for you and me, and working for our redemption. The dangers don't have to be past to dine here. In fact, this table is for those tossed in the storm, for those who need life and hope and healing. No one is unwelcomed here. So take courage today. Come to the table. Come and eat for, as Paul says, it will help you survive. Come join the fellowship of storm-tossed sinners and shipwrecked saints. Come because through Jesus's body and blood we are all being rescued and redeemed. Amen.