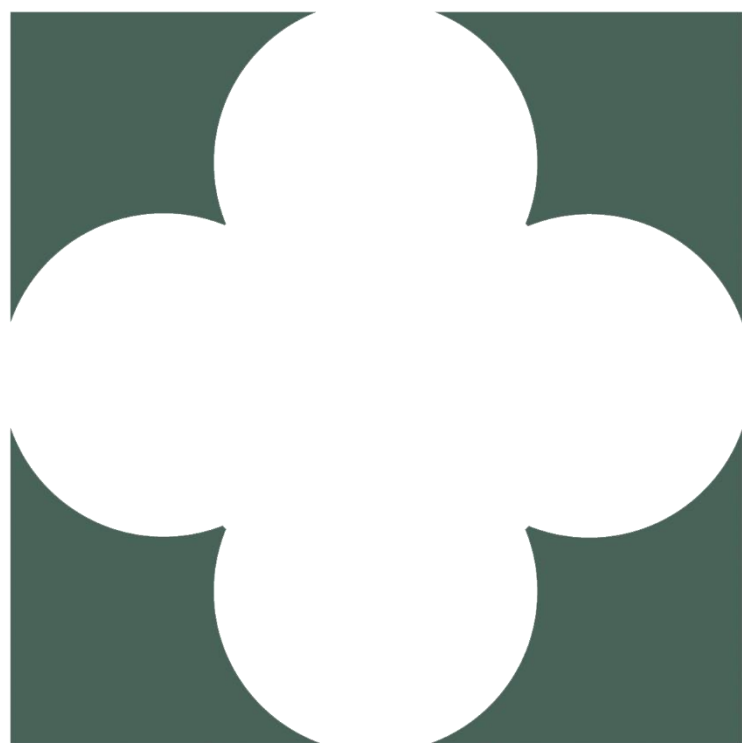


The Storms of Life

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seattle first baptist

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Acts 27:13-36

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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 Adriatic Sea, 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.

Ahoy, matey! In the latest of our journey through the book of Acts, learning about the development of the early church—the church in transition—we are heading to sea on a voyage, alongside the apostle Paul and others. But this was no jolly “3 hour tour,” this was sailing from Greece to Italy two thousand years ago.

Paul, as Pastor Mario preached recently, had been imprisoned in Philippi for preaching the gospel, the good news of liberation for all. While trying to sort out his situation, Paul asked to see the Emperor — that is, Caesar, in Rome. Some local government officials even suggested that Paul didn’t deserve to be imprisoned, but in fact could have been released. But because he had already requested to see the Emperor, a trip to Rome was set in motion and could not be easily undone.

And so Paul and his companions set to sea on a ship. But they did not have an easy journey ahead of them. The Mediterranean Sea, the Aegean Sea, and finally, the Adriatic Sea, were rough and challenging. All of the tactics the sailors usually would employ to ease the strain on the ship and crew, like throwing cargo overboard and getting rid of their tackle and trying to reinforce the mast — none of those tactics would work. They found some land to try to undergird the ship’s structure, but the moment they got back in the boat, it felt as if it were all for naught.

Now, I’m no seafarer — I absolutely love kayaking and canoeing, and being on the water truly is my happy place — but when the winds pick up and the white caps begin to touch the tops of the waves, then I get pretty nervous and would like a seasoned sailor to be in charge! I have no desire to experience, as a recent REI kayaking guide called it, a “water opportunity” caused by choppy seas.

But these sailors in our story, accompanied by the apostle, trying to get him to Rome to speak with the Emperor, these sailors must have been not only wary of a “water opportunity” but terrified. Many of the sailors were probably Greek, and potentially worshipped the Greek gods that Pastor Patricia mentioned last week. They had gods for everything — surely Poseidon, god of the seas, or Hermes, god of travel and trade, would help them out! But no matter what they did, the sailors continued to be overwhelmed, some of them even trying to escape the ship, because it was surely going to run aground.

Friends, even if you are not familiar with the ins and outs of sailing ships, you absolutely know what it is to be confronted with a storm. Whether that storm is actually weather-related (a snow-pocalypse, tornado alley, torrential rain or heat dome event), or if it is a storm of the life-variety, we all have experienced times when we feel like there is chaos all around us, like we are not equipped for what we are facing, like we are disoriented

and honestly unsure if we will make it through. The storms of cancer, aging and loss of independence, addiction, trauma, war, abuse, gun violence, chronic illness, job insecurity, poverty, racism, misogyny, homophobia, transphobia, fascism ... so many storms are raging in our lives, all around us, and in this world.

We don't only know what it is to be faced with storms as individuals — we also know what it's like as a church. Storms of COVID-19 pandemic and adjusting to digital worship and being isolated from loved ones, storms of planning for the long-term health of this congregation by asking so many questions — some that we are eager to answer and some we are afraid to face -- storms of the changing relationship of church and society, storms of personnel questions as one pastor retires and an interim enters. There are many storms, and though we do not face them alone, sometimes that is hard to remember, and we wonder what to do.

And so what did Paul's crew do? And what can we, Seattle First Baptist Church, do, as we learn from these ancient seafaring apostles who were working with their own developing church in transition?

The sailors lightened the load of their ship. They knew that to be tossed about on stormy seas, they needed to be able to maneuver quickly. And while this wasn't steering the Titanic, the ship still needed all the help it could get to try to be light and quick as it was bandied about by the waves.

So, church: what can we do to lighten our load while we are in transition? While we face the storms of life as individuals and also as a congregation? I have to admit that "load lightening" is not something I am skilled at. I love being active and I love doing things and gathering with people — but we all have limits. And as Paul's sailing companions found it necessary to let some things go to lighten the load of the ship, I wonder if they focused on the necessities. And we can, too, dear church. We can focus on the values that bring us together, the values of spiritual formation, presence to and with each other, respecting and learning about our similarities and differences, hospitality to all, undoing our biases and protecting our environment. When we hold our values at the center of our life together, when we let these values shape us as individuals and as a community of faith, then we have a head start in discerning what is necessary to let go and what is necessary to hold on to.

The sailors also stuck together. Though some of them admittedly did try to abandon ship, trying to save their own lives under pretext of lowering the anchor, Paul reminded the crew that God had promised him that all who sailed on that ship would be saved if they stayed together.

Friends, in these tumultuous times, I know that, to some, it isn't "popular" to be linked to Christianity. I feel that, too. As I named a few times over the past few months, it can be so easy for progressive Christians, and progressive Baptists in our particular context, to look down on others; to distance ourselves and say "we're not THAT kind of Baptist" or "we are a different kind of Christian." And sometimes, yes, to those outside this faith tradition it absolutely looks like Christianity as a whole is a sinking ship. And oof — that may be a sermon to pick up for another time. But today, I wonder, what does SFBC know about sticking together? About moving forward together? About showing up together?

We might look to our 153 years of history in this congregation for some clues. When the church went from a small plot of land downtown to this current property, some members of the congregation took great personal risk in investing in the building in this particular place because they believed in the ministry that could happen here. When government officials sat in the balcony watching the pastor's sermons and monitoring for any anti-government rhetoric or extreme pacifism, the congregation stuck together, not to be intimidated or pressured. When the church became affirming of lesbian and gay people and the pastors officiated same-sex marriages, the congregation took on this new facet of identity with care, though they were decades ahead of other churches in Seattle and certainly ahead of denominational bodies. And there are so many more instances of when the church chose to stick together as a congregation — because the values of this body of faith call us to be together.

Now a caveat: of course, there are times when people do need to step away from the church or from religion for a time, for myriad reasons. Perhaps they need to heal from trauma or they are reassessing their values and what communities they want to invest in. There are many reasons why someone would step away from the church or from Christianity as a whole, and to people who feel those needs sometimes: I bless you and will continue to pray for you, and we will be here to welcome you back.

Paul also led the sailors in a time of prayer and breaking bread together. They took time to be in fellowship with each other, to gather and pray and share in the life-affirming act of eating together. When things get scary in the world and the storms of violence and poverty and fascism rise up, as they are now, we as the church can take steps to gather together. Instead of being pressured by the rest of the world to give in to ideological division and praise individualism over everything, I pray that this church does what Paul showed us on that ship so long ago. Make time for fellowship. Make time to gather — not just for the work of committees or because there's an obligation — but be together because we love one another and we need one another. Pray together — the Tuesday prayer group that has been going for over 130 weeks now, meeting every Tuesday at

noon on Zoom, that group has shown the importance of gathering to unite our hearts and minds as we pray or meditate or share together about the needs in our lives and in our community. And break bread together. In this seemingly-simple act of hospitality, of meeting the basic human need of satisfying hunger, a profound connection takes place. It is almost impossible to hate someone with whom you have shared a meal. And feeding the stomach is not the only way that eating together is transformative. Henri Nouwen wrote, “When we break bread and give it to each other, fear vanishes and God becomes very close.”

When I think of fellowship and SFBC, these scenes flash through my mind: the church picnic on Harvard, the children in Halloween costumes in the gym, marching together in Black Lives Matter protests, eating together in the Fellowship Hall and in Place at the Table dinners, gathering with me for my “Where in Seattle is Pastor Anita?” meetings when I first moved to the city. I think of Outreach folks getting to know each other while stocking boxes for Aurora Commons, and the nursery workers being present with the youngest children in this community, and the ABW and Men’s Group and Senior Retreat and more and more and more. We know how to spend time together — and so let us claim the true power and profundity of fellowship around the breaking of bread, proclaiming that each and every time we gather as one body, we are in the very presence of the Holy.

Lastly, we can’t deny that our scripture story today goes into a place that we may find difficult to draw a hopeful lesson from: the ship that Paul and his companions were on eventually ran aground. There was no loss of life, as Paul had proclaimed earlier in the passage, but the ship as they had known it ceased its use to them. The sailors had done all they could to preserve the ship, but in the end, preserving their lives was more important. Perhaps they knew they could get another ship, perhaps they were close to their destination, perhaps they figured that God would be with them as they moved on to something new.

I wonder if you have ever felt like you were running aground. Like it was the only way for your journey to continue. I know I have. It reminds me of the saying that if you don’t rest your body, your body will take the rest from you. That feels like running aground to me — the ship no longer functions towards its purpose, and so it needs to stop, take stock, and serve a different purpose.

Beloveds, what season are you in? Are the seas smooth and glassy, like Puget Sound on a windless day? Or are you experiencing the turbulence of ebbing and flowing tides and waves crashing on rocks? Are you shipwrecked, calculating your next move?

Wherever you find yourself today, hear the good news: center your lives on the necessities — being close to the Holy by being close to each other; holding dear the values of environmental stewardship, hospitality to all people, self-reflection for the purpose of undoing biases. Gather with one another, spending time together and breaking bread together. Pray together, bringing your cares and joys to share with one another's hearts and with God. The good news is that we are not alone — we have weathered storms before, and we will get through these ones — together, as a community united in following the Way of Jesus.

Friends, the storms of life sure are raging, for all of us, in different ways. It is hard to know which way to go, hard to find a heading, hard to figure out what to let go of so that we can be more nimble and meet the needs of this time and place. But I know that we have a great wealth of love among us that can be moved by the values we hold dear, so that we can meet the challenges of this time and the opportunities of the future with grace, as we pursue justice in all we do, for ourselves and each other and our community and the planet.

May it be so.