

“PAUL’S MEDITERRANEAN CRUISE NIGHTMARE.”

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First Christian Reformed Church, Lynden, WA

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Texts for the Sermon: Acts 27:13-26

Introduction.

We are about two weeks into Paul’s cruise from Israel to Italy. Ever since leaving the second port of Sidon the winds have been against them, it has been slow going up and along the coast of Asia Minor (Turkey). At the port of Myra they transferred to another grain freighter from Alexandria in Egypt bound for Italy.

The Nile River valley of Egypt was called the breadbasket of Italy in ancient times. Every year some 1700 ships bearing wheat and corn would sail from Egypt to Italy. These ships were from 140 to 180 feet long and from 35 to 50 feet wide. The hold was 40 feet deep and capable of carrying 1,000 tons. They were single masted sailing vessels. Having only one mast and one sail they were not easily maneuverable in contrary winds.

We are told later there were 276 passengers made up of at least three classes of people, the ship’s crew of sailors, the Roman centurion and a number of soldiers or guards, and prisoners including Paul. We know that Dr. Luke and a Thessalonian convert, Aristarchus were with him.

27:13-17, driven to Wits’ End by God’s storm.

All of us embark on trips and travels assuming fair winds and good fortune, never anticipating trouble. As all of us embark on our various journeys in life, we anticipate only good things, never knowing what awaits us ahead. When the south winds blow, we are tempted to believe they will last forever.

While our work is steady, the market is up, everyone is healthy, the wife is happy, life is good. Everything is going according to our plans, our dreams, hopes, wishes.

But gentle south winds don’t last. Suddenly, unexpectedly a Northeaster strikes. The word for it is Euraquilo, Euroclydon. Euro – east wind; Aquilo – north wind.

This word appears only here in the Bible, but it was well known in the ancient world and feared by every sailor. They were like a typhoon or a hurricane. It evokes images of whirling clouds, wind, rain, waves. Luke paints a vivid picture of the worsening situation. Things go from bad to worse, and worse to worser. Desperate times call for desperate measures.

They are at the mercy of the wind, driven along out of control.
They manage to secure the dingy that was being towed behind.
They tied ropes all the way around the ship to help hold it together.

They lowered the sails and gear fearing running aground and being broken up on the Syrtis sandbanks off the coast of north Africa, the graveyard of many ships.

On the second day they jettisoned cargo.

On the third day they threw the ships tackle and rigging overboard.

They did all they knew to do. They are cold, wet, sleepless, without ability to eat.

The tension is heightened by many days of no sun or stars, no way of navigating, or knowing where they are. It is a scary place to be completely in the dark. They have nothing firm to grasp.

Acts 27:20 When neither sun nor stars appeared for many days, and no small tempest lay on us, all hope of our being saved was at last abandoned.

The storm blew so hard for so long they despaired of life. All hope was lost.

Do you know where they are on the map at that moment? I know exactly where they are. They are at the place the name of which is Wits' End. You won't find it on Google Maps, but you will find it on God's map. In fact it is a place God likes to hang out.

The old English phrase Wits' End was first coined in the King James Bible in Psalm 107 which happens to be a very appropriate psalm for our text.

Psalm 107:25-28 [God] commanded and raised the stormy wind,
which lifted up the waves of the sea.

26 They mounted up to heaven; they went down to the depths;
their courage melted away in their evil plight;

27 they reeled and staggered like drunken men and were at their *wits' end*.

28 **Then** they cried to the Lord in their trouble.

Wits' End is when we're out of options, out of ideas, out of patience, we don't know what to say or what to do. To be at your wits' end is to have attempted and exhausted every means to solve a problem.

This is often God's way. He brings us to the end of ourselves. We have done everything we can think of to help ourselves or save ourselves and there is nothing left to do, no more hope. Then we are ready to turn to God and cast ourselves on Him.

God intentionally drives us to Wits' End, so that we will stop trying to glorify ourselves, our ability, intellect, strength, and will turn to Him, that He might glorify Himself in our delivery.

You know Wits' End, you have been there, so have I. God's wind will blow us to Wits' End.

One of the incredible things about Wits' End is God is meets us there and helps us regardless of how we got there. Even it is because of our sin, whether we have wrecked our lives with drugs, alcohol, illicit sex, porn, lying, fraud, anger, all manner of immorality, or just plain old garden variety stupidity. Those things don't disqualify us from God's rescue, even when we are repeat offenders.

If we come to the cross of Jesus, confessing and repenting, and pleading the blood of Jesus, then His blood covers our sin and guilt and shame, removes our condemnation, and gives us His righteousness.

Is this not also a picture of God's grace? When we sin against Him and don't obey His Word and go our own way and do our own thing, He doesn't hold our sin against us, or treat us as our sins deserve, but has compassion on us and shows us mercy and grace. He delivers us from the messes we put ourselves in.

The sooner you can get to your Wits' End, the sooner you will see God's glory and grace. As long as you keep trying on your own, as long as you keep resisting, questioning, and doubting God, as long as you refuse to repent and submit, your storm will keep raging, the waves will keep coming.

God sent all this trouble against the believers and unbelievers; they were all in this together. Unbelievers will come to know God, and believers will come to know God in deeper ways.

"Wits' end" experiences have a unique ability to reveal Jesus. There's a sense in which we only begin to know Him as Lord when we come to the end of ourselves.

Having been driven to Wits' End by God's storm, now they are promised hope by God's Word.

27:21-26, delivered to hope's landing by God's Word.

Paul somehow stands up on the heaving deck and perhaps yelling over the howling wind speaks. He begins with a sort of "I told you so" kind of statement.

I don't generally recommend doing this sort of thing in the midst of someone's crisis. Telling someone "I told you so" after something bad happens is not a way to win friends. Husbands and wives know this, parents and children know this.

"Reproof, that carries no comfort, is cruel." John Calvin.

If all Paul said was "I told you so," if all Paul said was "if only you had listened to me, you would not be in this fix," then indeed that would be cruel, and unhelpful.

The point of his words is not just to jab them with a stick, but to say my words before were wise and true, so you can trust me with what I am now about to say. Paul speaks the way he does to establish his credibility and authority, so that they will listen to him more attentively now.

“You didn’t listen to me before, listen to me now. I spoke the truth then, and I am speaking the truth to you again. Take heart, be of good courage, have hope. God is gracious and merciful.”

This how the Gospel speaks to us. It begins with sin, with a call to repentance, to acknowledge our sin against God and His Word and will. But it doesn’t stay there, it moves to hope and help.

Take heart, don’t be afraid.

How can Paul say these things so confidently in a ship being tossed like a cork in the ocean? God is his witness and source. He had an ***angelic vision***. God makes Himself clear. No doubt Paul was praying, and God heard and answered by sending an angel.

He had divine revelation, a divine promise of God’s favor and providence. Paul would be saved for the sake of the proclamation of the Gospel to Caesar in Rome. And everyone with him will be delivered along with him.

Now someone might be thinking, well that was easy for Paul. If I had an angel show up I would be fearless too.

You have something better, you have the Spirit of God in you, God’s very presence. You have something better, you have God’s divine revelation in Scripture, all His promises. You have the church of Jesus Christ, the company of saints, to build you up and encourage you.

Notice Paul is not hesitant to declare his faith before godless men. Paul is a man’s man, and he is a worshipper of the one true God. They know he was a prisoner for that very reason. He gives the glory to God; God will do as He promised.

What a testimony, to be able to stand on a ship in great peril, in a raging sea, speaking over a howling wind, and say, this storm is under the authority of God. God’s Word is sovereign and supreme. What God promises, He will do.

This is faith, standing firm in the face of storms and temptations and Satan’s lies and deception.

Being agents of hope, in seemingly hopeless situations.

Can we be a non-anxious presence in an anxious situation, in an anxious world?

To whom can you be a witness to the promises of God?

Who needs you to hold up their weary, flagging arms?

Who more than a Christian can be an agent of hope? Who else believes this world is created, sustained, ruled and control by a living, powerful sovereign God?

One of our greatest messages to the world is God is with us and God is powerful.

Your knowledge of God, your love for God, your confidence that God is God and in control, can be hope and strength for others. God has placed us in a secular world, in a secular nation, in a land without hope to be beacons of hope.

May God use each of us to be a blessing to all those around us, to our neighborhood, to our community, to our nation. May we be as salt and light, may we be as leaven to the whole loaf.

We must run aground on some island.

Notice that simple little statement. It is actually quite risky. Paul has put himself out there. This will be the proof. This will make him out to be a liar or a truth teller.

After they shipwreck on an island, they will know, Paul is a man of God, to whom God speaks and they will be left without excuse if they don't believe his message, his Gospel.

This will be a sign to you. You will find a baby lying in a manger.
This will be a sign to you. On the third day Jesus will rise from the dead.
This will be a sign to you. We will run aground on some island.

This statement means that if it happens it was not by fate, luck, or chance. Not by the hand of the ship's captain, not by their navigation skills, not by their knowing the way, but by the providence of God. If they end up on an island, it is the hand of God.

Implications and application.

A ship on a sea is a metaphor for the Christian life. Nowhere in Scripture are we promised smooth sailing.

How many of you are in a storm right now? How many of you have problems in your life right now? How many problems do you think are in this room right now? Let's say there are 300 x 20 problems, so 6,000 problems.

All the problems of heaven and earth combined are nothing compared to the mighty power of God. There has never been a storm, a situation, a personal problem that Christians cannot trust God for. Jesus trusted His Father on the cross, and nothing you or I ever face will compare to what He suffered. You can trust Him. You can take heart and not be afraid.

We are told it is a dangerous journey and every storm, every trial reminds us of that, and reminds us we are on the right path.

Matthew 7:14 The gate is narrow, and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few.

You should all read John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* and you should read it to your children and grandchildren.

Don't buy the false teaching and false hope of the health and wealth gospel, sometimes called the theology of glory that expects total success, finding all the answers, winning all the battles, living happily ever after in perfect families, having health and wealth because we are the king's kids.

Our theology is a theology of the cross, a theology of a king who came as a baby, a man of sorrows, submitting to the shame of dying on a cross and saying to those who follow Him: "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me" (Matt. 16:24).

We cannot live in a dangerous world unscathed. Any harm or loss in this world is for our good and awakens us to consider heaven more closely. We cannot live in the storms without jettisoning and throwing overboard what is temporal and weighing us down, especially all the sin that clings so closely. Trials and tribulations focus us, help us reassess priorities, what's important.

There will be storms and humanly they will seem hopeless and there is a reason for that. It is so God gets the glory when He brings us through them.

God allows severe trials, heightened to the worst degree, to heighten the miracle of His grace and deliverance, which results in greater praise and worship.

When a Northeaster blows you all the way to your Wits' End, listen to the Word of God and put your hope in the one to whom you belong, the one you worship. If by faith you put your hope in Him, you will be saved and delivered from death.

Holy Father, have mercy on us. Enable us by your grace to see your hand at work in our lives. Enable us to surrender our stubborn wills and our personal agendas to you. Enable us to see your love and kindness in the midst of our storms that are sent by you for our spiritual benefit.