

"Trusting Jesus in the Storms of Life"
Sermon Series on *The Way of the Spirit!*
Dr. Peter B. Barnes
August 30, 2015
(Acts 27:1-26)

Meteorologists are telling us that we're in the heart of what is known as Hurricane Season. It begins in June and lasts till early November, but historically August and September are the height of the greatest hurricane activity. Nine of the ten worst hurricanes in U.S. history occurred during these two months, including Hurricane Katrina whose 10-year anniversary was celebrated yesterday. It's amazing to witness the power of Mother Nature as the wind and the waves create such destruction.

Have you ever been out at sea during a storm? It's not a fun experience. When I was in the fifth grade, my dad, who always had big dreams, said to my mother, "Why don't we buy a boat, take the boys out of school for a year, and sail around the world? It would be a great educational experience." My mother, who was much more practical and down-to-earth, said, "Why don't we charter one for a week and see if we like it?!"

So that's what we did. My parents chartered a 55-foot Ocean Racing Ketch named the Malabar 13 out of Miami, and we sailed around the Bahamas to various ports of call. It was one of the best and most memorable family vacations we ever had. However, during the trip we encountered a violent storm. It wasn't a hurricane, but it sure felt like one. Fifteen foot waves tossed the 55-foot boat back and forth, up and down, and everyone in my family except my father got very sea sick. I can still remember my mother calling out from down below in the cabin area for someone to bring her a bucket. I simply preferred to hang over the railing of the ship as I lost my cookies!

This morning we read of another voyage that involved a storm, and this time the apostle Paul was on board. The ship wasn't a 55-foot Ketch like the one I was on. Rather, it was a large vessel with close to 300 crew and passengers. And the storm didn't take place in the Caribbean; it happened in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea while Paul was making his final voyage to the capital city of Rome.

The Voyage.

The apostle Paul embarked on his voyage by sailing up the coast to Sidon. (Take a look at the map) The next port of call was Myra, but that's when things started getting difficult. The prevailing wind at that time of year was the west wind, and they could only make it to Myra by sailing above the island of Cyprus and then following a zigzag course up the coast. At Myra



they found a ship from Alexandria that was bound for Rome. It was probably a grain or a corn ship, because Egypt was the granary of Italy. If you look at the map, you can see what a long way around they had to take. The strong west wind made the direct journey impossible, and after many days of battling against the wind, the boat sailed just to the north of the island of Crete and finally came to a little port called Fair Havens.

It was clear to everyone that they wouldn't be able to complete their journey to Italy, and they'd have to winter somewhere. The only question was whether they should stay in Fair Havens or seek out a better harbor further west. The adverse weather conditions had caused a serious delay, and the Day of Atonement, referred to as "the Fast" in this passage, had already past. In 59 AD, that holiday fell on October 5th.

According to the navigational practice of the time, the usual sailing season by Jewish calculation lasted from Pentecost (in late May) to the Feast of Tabernacles, which was 5 days after The Fast. The Romans considered sailing after September 15th doubtful and after November 11th suicidal.¹ Also, ancient ships didn't have either a sextant or a compass, and in cloudy weather they had no means of finding their way.

Paul was an experienced and veteran seafarer by this time. One New Testament scholar catalogued that the apostle made 11 voyages on the Mediterranean Sea before he set sail for Rome, and he estimated that the apostle traveled at least 3,500 miles by sea.² While the ship was docked at Fair Havens, Paul advised the captain, the owner of the ship, and the centurion in charge to make plans to winter the ship there.

But the captain and the ship-owner thought differently. They believed there was a chance of finding a better port farther west along the southern coast of Crete. They had a point. Fair Havens was not a very good harbor, and it wasn't near any sizable town where the winter days could be passed easily by the crew.

The final decision was left up to the centurion, who was the highest ranking Roman official on board. He decided to follow the advice of the experts, and they set sail for Phoenix. The centurion paid more attention to the owner and the captain than he did Paul, and the Greek text says he was "tranquilized" into believing the persuasive talk of the other men. It wasn't the first or the last time the "experts" have been wrong.

Have you ever had an experience when people didn't take your advice? You studied the matter yourself, and you had a lot of experience to bring to bear in the decision. And you also had a gut feeling about what the group should do. But the boss didn't listen to you, and they decided to go in another direction. If you've ever had an experience like that, then you know what Paul must have been feeling as they boarded the ship to sail to Phoenix.

Let me also ask, have you ever found yourself on a journey you would never choose for yourself? I find it interesting that Paul was on this ship not because of he chose to be there. It was decided for him. He wasn't making this journey because he wanted to go, but because he was a prisoner of the Roman government.

Sometimes we find ourselves on a journey we wouldn't choose, and the circumstances that are beyond our control. You might be on one of those journeys right now. It might be a journey of a medical diagnosis or mental illness for yourself or someone you love. Or you might feel like you're on a journey at work or school where you are with co-workers or classmates whose values are opposed to yours. Maybe it's a journey that is leading you away from everything you have known and loved, and you wonder what God is up to.

Sometimes we find ourselves on a journey we didn't sign up for, but it's the journey we're on. Remember, God is with you, just as He was with the apostle Paul. Even when bad decisions are made, and even when the storm hits, God will not abandon us.

II. The Storm.

An unexpected south wind made the plan appear easy at first, but then a terrible wind from the northeast struck with great force. It was a wind of hurricane strength, and the problem was that if they couldn't control the ship, they would inevitably be blown to the Syrtis Sands off the coast of North Africa which was a graveyard for many ships. Being unable to see the sun and the stars because of the storm, they didn't know where they were, and the crew began to lose hope. All told, the storm lasted 14 days.

A granary ship wasn't a small vessel. It could be as large as 140 feet long, 36 feet wide, and 33 feet high. But in a storm, there were certain disadvantages to a ship like this. They were the same width at the bow as at the stern, except that the stern swept up like a goose's neck. Also, they had no rudder like a modern ship, and they were steered with 2 large paddles coming from the stern on each side. A boat like this was hard to manage, especially in a storm. It had only 1 mast with 1 large square sail. And with a sail like that, the ship couldn't sail into the wind. And the single mast with the large sail put an extra strain on the ship in a storm this strong.

Fearing that the ship might break apart, the crew took measures in a desperate attempt to save the vessel. Notice how the crew flew into action. They passed the ropes underneath and over the ship to try and hold it together. Then they took down the sails, and, afraid of hitting the shoals, they lowered the sea anchor. They were working the problem from every possible angle, but the situation continued to deteriorate.

The next thing they did was they abandoned the things that they valued. They threw the cargo overboard – the very cargo that made them take the risk of the trip in the first place. They even abandoned the ship's tackle. They let go of securing the rigging which was necessary to sail the ship if it survived the storm. In other words, they abandoned the future.

Their final response was they abandoned all hope. *“When neither sun nor stars appeared for many days, and no small tempest raged, all hope of our being safe was at last abandoned” (27:20)*. They lost sight of land a long time ago, and now there was nothing in the sky, day or night, to orient or guide them. They were completely in the dark. For 14 days they didn't know where they were, and the ship was probably leaking badly. Is it any wonder they began to lose all hope of ever reaching safety?

Reading what happened to the men on this ship, it feels like I'm reading what we all do whenever we encounter a storm in life. First, we fly into action, and try to fix the problem. Then, when that doesn't work, we start to abandon the things we value. And sometimes we even bargain with God and say, “If you just get me out of this situation, Lord, I'll get my act together and really start living for you. Or I'll start going to church. Or I'll give you a tithe of my money.” Finally, when even that doesn't seem to work, we abandon all hope and despair of life itself.

Have you reached the straining point in life? Are you at the point of breaking, and have you abandoned all hope? The good news in this passage is that it was when they had lost hope God sent them a word of encouragement through the apostle Paul, and eventually He delivered them.

III. God's Word of Encouragement Through Paul.

Into this crisis of despair Paul gave a word of encouragement, and he spoke to his companions to offer hope. Paul urged the crew to keep up their courage, and he said that none of them would be lost, only the ship. Then he related an experience he had the previous night when an angel of the Lord stood beside him and told him not to be afraid. The angel promised Paul that he would still stand trial before Caesar, and he added that God would also give him the lives of all his fellow passengers as well. The word of encouragement wasn't just for Paul; it was for the passengers and the crew of the ship too.

It's important to hear a word of encouragement whenever we're in the middle of a storm, isn't it? It can mean the difference between giving up and hanging on. Think about a time when someone spoke a word of encouragement to you when you were in the middle of a storm. Do you remember what a lifeline of hope that was to you?

Yesterday, Frank and Laura McNair stopped by our house and gave us this rock from the river near their home in Bath, NC. It was a gift of encouragement. You see, this rock is called a "ballast rock", and it has an interesting history.

Bath is the oldest colony in North Carolina, and it dates back to 1705. Ships would come to the colony from England, and they were loaded with supplies. But much of the cargo was lightweight, such as fabric, books, and seeds. To help the small sailing ships stay upright in heavy weather, the hold of each ship was filled with ballast stones like this one. They would help keep the ship aright in the gales of the Atlantic Ocean. The merchandise shipped back to England on the return trip was heavy, such as pine tar and things like that. So the ballast stones were discarded in the harbor at Bath, and they threw them into the river. This stone is one of the ballast stones that steadied those small sailing ships across the Atlantic.

Frank and Laura presented us this rock to us and said, "May this stone be a metaphor for God in your life. The weight of God's steadying presence is what can help you whenever the storms of life come. So when it gets tough in the storm you're in, take encouragement from this rock."

Their words and this rock were a gift of encouragement which meant so much to Lorie and me during this season of challenge and loss. To whom do you need to offer a word of encouragement today? Who is going through a hard time right now and needs a phone call, or a card, or a hug? Or even a rock!

I want you to notice in this passage the way in which God's promises were the foundation of Paul's encouragement. When others around him despaired of life itself, Paul was confident in the promises of God to see them through the storm they were in.

What storm are you facing today, and how does God want you to stand with confidence on His promises, too? The storm may be a literal one, like the people who live in the path of Hurricane Erika in the Dominican Republic or Haiti, or on the Florida coast. Or the storm you face may be of a different sort. Maybe it's a storm in your family, or in your business, or in your class, or on your team. Maybe your storm is a conflict with another person, or circumstances which have torn your world apart. Maybe your storm is declining health.

God's Word and His faithful promises can comfort all of us and give each of us confidence in the midst of whatever storm we may find ourselves in today. Look to Christ to see you through, and cling to His promises and hold on.

Conclusion.

The words of a favorite hymn entitled "It Is Well With My Soul" were written by Horatio Spafford in 1873. The story behind the writing of this great hymn is a powerful one. A series of

personal losses led to its writing, and the words express both the reality of storms and trials along with a strong confidence in God's presence and providence in the midst of them. I close by sharing the story with you.

In the late 1860s Horatio Spafford, a businessman in Chicago, suffered the death of his son. This was followed by financial setbacks due to the Great Chicago fire in 1871. Then in 1873, for the benefit of his wife's health and in order to assist in a series of evangelistic meetings in England with evangelist Dwight L. Moody, Spafford booked passage on a ship to England for his family and himself. But at the last minute, because of a business emergency, he sent his wife and 4 daughters on ahead as scheduled, while he planned to take another ship later. Tragically, on November 22nd the ship was stuck by another vessel, and it sank in the ocean. Mrs. Spafford survived, but all 4 daughters were lost and died at sea. Days later, he received a telegram from his wife which read, "Saved alone. What shall I do?"

As he sailed to England across the same ocean that had claimed the lives of his four girls to join his grieving wife, the captain of the ship called him to the bridge. He said, "A careful reckoning has been made, and I believe we are passing the place where the ship your family was on went down. I thought you would want to know." Horatio Spafford thanked the captain and returned to his cabin, and he sat down and wrote the lyrics of this great hymn in the midst of his adversity.³ After the loss of his only son, after he endured financial failure, and after his four daughters died at sea, Spafford wrote:

When peace like a river attendeth my way,
When sorrows like sea billows roll,
Whatever my lot, thou hast taught me to say,
"It is well, it is well with my soul."

Though Satan should buffet, though trials should come,
Let this blest assurance control:
That Christ has regarded my helpless estate,
And has shed His own blood for my soul.

My sin -- O, the bliss of this glorious thought,
My sin -- not in part but the whole,
Is nailed to the cross and I bear it no more:
Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, O my soul!

And, Lord, haste the day when my faith shall be sight,
The clouds be rolled back as a scroll,
The trump shall resound and the Lord shall descend:
"Even so" -- it is well with my soul.

Is it well with your soul this day? Do you have confidence in God despite the storm you're in? Look to Jesus; cling to Him. Hold fast to His Word. God is the only one who can see you through. Amen.

¹NIV Study Bible notes, p. 1,698.

²Ernst Haenchen, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Commentary*, p. 716.

³Adapted from Bryan J. Leech in *The Worshipping Church: Worship Leader's Edition*, p. 519.