

KEEP UP YOUR COURAGE
Acts 27:14-25

Dr. Howard Batson
First Baptist Church
Amarillo, Texas
July 15, 2018

We've all heard the proverbial saying that the two happiest days in a man's life are when he buys a boat and when he sells his boat. I've never owned a boat. But today's sermon is not going to make you want to go out and buy a boat.

When I think about boats, I think about my friend who was pastoring a church in Arkansas. He said it was the busiest time of his life. (He's a college president now.) **He said he was working seventy to ninety hours a week and there was really no family time. He dog growled at him when he came home. The children had to be introduced to him whenever they ran into him. He and his wife were like ships passing in the night.**

They agreed something had to be done. How did they solve the problem? They bought a boat, a pontoon boat. It was a party barge – perfect for family fun. They could picnic on the water. Swim. Laugh. Play. Cook. Pull kids on the inner tubes. Just relax in the sun. There were some members in the church who had a cabin on the lake. They said, “Hey, just park your boat at our cabin. We'll give you a key. Go over there any time you want.”

Well, he had the boat, but he still couldn't get away from the needs of the people in the church. He said he had a hard time explaining the boat to inquiring church members and probing deacons. What's a secretary supposed to say? “Sorry, the pastor is chilling out behind his Ray Bans, working on his tan.” Didn't sound too good.

So, one of the children had a brainstorm. We need to name the boat, Daddy.” “Name the boat?” he asked. “Why do we need to name the boat?” They giggled and whispered. Soon the whole family was laughing. Ever heard of a boat named Visitation?

The next gorgeous sun-splashed day, as the calls poured in like clockwork, the church secretary explained to the congregation and to the deacons, “I'm sorry, our pastor is out on Visitation.” (Randall O'Brien, *I Feel Better All Over Than I Do Anywhere Else*)

You remember that Paul was arrested as Agabus the prophet had mysteriously indicated he would be. He has appealed to Caesar and, through a long process, he is finally making his way to Rome. He is going to Rome, however, as a prisoner.

Look at Acts 23:11. The Lord stands by Paul's side and says, “Take courage; for as you have solemnly witnessed to My cause at Jerusalem, so you must witness at Rome also.” It is God's plan for Paul to take the gospel to the capital city of the empire. But he goes in chains. He goes as a prisoner, appealing as a Roman citizen to Caesar.

Look at Acts 27:1

And when it was decided that we should sail for Italy, they proceeded to deliver Paul and some other prisoners to a centurion of the Augustan cohort named Julius.

Notice in verse 2 that they are accompanied by Aristarchus, a Macedonian of Thessalonica. He is described as a fellow prisoner in Colossians 4:10 and a fellow worker in Philemon 24. In verse 3 you notice, as in verses 1 and 2, we have the first person plural pronoun “we,” which means Luke is along for the trip too. So we know we have a traveling party that includes Julius and his soldiers, other prisoners, Aristarchus, Luke, and Paul.

This is no easy trip. It’s a 2,000 mile journey to Rome. We find out in verse 6 that they are placed on an Alexandrian ship. This is probably a large vessel – perhaps 140 feet in length. One mast. One square sail. But the going is rough. In verse 4 it says that the winds were “contrary.” In verse 7 it says the wind “did not permit us to go farther.” In verse 8 it says “with difficulty.” In verse 14 it is a “violent wind.” In verse 18 they are “violently storm-tossed.” And in verse 20, “neither sun nor stars appeared for many days, and no small storm was assailing us.” In verse 27 they are being driven about. And in verse 41, the ship hits a reef and breaks up.

After boarding the Alexandrian ship in verse 6, they make it with difficulty to a place called Fair Havens. Should they sail further? Should they try to make it to Phoenix or not, hoping they would eventually make it on to Rome? During the winter, no ship sailed on the Mediterranean. And Fair Havens was not the best winter harbor. But the captain and the sailors wanted to try. They wanted to go for it. They wanted to make it to Phoenix. But it’s already late in the season. There is a real possibility of a sudden, adverse wind that could wreck the ship.

Paul gives them his opinion in verse 10. “Guys, I don’t think we should undertake the voyage,” he says. “We are going to have a lot of damage, a great loss. Not only will we lose the cargo on the ship, but we’re going to lose our lives if we try to go any further. It’s just too late in the season,” I can hear Paul saying. “We just need to stay here at Fair Havens.”

You might wonder why Paul had a right to give his two cents worth. But don’t forget, Paul was a seasoned traveler who had already been shipwrecked three times and had spent a whole night and a day in the open sea, drifting, according to 2 Corinthians 11:25.

But in verse 11, the Centurion, the Roman officer, is more persuaded by the pilot and the captain of the ship than by what was being said by Paul. Why does the captain of the ship want to take the risk? Suetonius tells us that because of the shortages of food during the winter months that the Emperor Claudius offered substantial bonuses to ship owners who took the chance of sailing late in the season. Maybe that’s why the captain was willing to try for the harbor at Phoenix. From there, it would have been possible to make for Rome if the weather was to hold.

But what Paul said would happen did happen. Look at verse 14. “But before very long there rushed down from the land a violent wind, called Euraquilo. That’s an odd name. It is really a slang compound of Greek and Latin. It’s a northeaster, a strong winter wind, a destructive wind.

According to Luke, they ran before the wind to avoid capsizing, then found temporary shelter behind the small island of Claudi. Temporarily safe behind the island, they had two choices. First, they could turn and run before the storm once more. In that case, they would be faced with the eventual possibility of the ship's wrecking on the north African coast. Luke mentions the fear of the sailors that they would be driven onto that coast. Their second choice was to secure the ship, point it into the wind, and drift slowly westward in the teeth of the storm.

They decided to drift into the storm.

Safely behind the island for a few moments, they did three things. First, they hauled in the small boat that, like other ancient ships, they towed on a line behind them. Second, they took ropes and undergirded the ship to strengthen it against the waves. Third, and most important, they trimmed the sail. Each of these actions was nothing more than a hope, a busy hope, of securing an ancient ship in a storm.

Storms always come – in all of our lives.

Scott Peck began his popular book entitled *The Road Less Traveled* by pointing out that life is hard. Life is hard for everybody. We should not expect anything else. We should not be surprised when storms come into our lives. We may face a prolonged illness, the loss of a family member, a financial crisis, a rebellious teenager, depression, family tensions, an accident, the loss of job, or a divorce. Storms will come into our lives. That's just the nature of life as we know it.

The question is not whether the storms will come, but how we will respond to those storms. People who are unprepared for storms are blown off-course. They flounder. They shipwreck. They drown.

There is a poem entitled, "Ships and Souls."

Ships sail east and ships sail west
While the self same breezes blow:
It's the set of the sails and not the gales
That determines the way they go.

Like the winds of the sea is the way of fate
As we journey along through life.
It's the set of the soul that determines the goal
And not the calm or the strife.

In Psalm 107:23-27, we read these words:

Those who go down to the sea in ships,
Who do business on great waters;
They have seen the works of the Lord,
And His wonders in the deep.
For He spoke and raised up a stormy wind,

Which lifted up the waves of the sea.
They rose up to the heavens, they went down to the depths;
Their soul melted away in their misery.
They reeled and staggered like a drunken man,
And were at their wits' end.

So was Paul. And so were the others who had been on this traumatic voyage – a voyage to Rome.

In verse 18, they start throwing the cargo overboard. In verse 19, it gets so bad they start throwing the ship's tackle overboard. They had not seen the sun or the stars in many days (verse 20). And all their hope of being saved – look at the end of verse 20 – was gradually abandoned.

Sometimes life takes us to that point, that point where we really don't want to live anymore. That point where we are so broken, we are so hurt, we are so tossed to and fro by the storms of this life that even our zeal to breathe is gone. We don't care anymore.

There are some of you here this morning, some of you watching by way of television – life is so hard for you right now because of that divorce, because you've lost your job, because of a moral failure, because of a financial hardship, because of disappointment with somebody you thought would never disappoint you. Whatever your storm might be, you're at that point where all sense of hope has been abandoned. There is no greater misery than the misery of hopelessness. "All hope was abandoned," he says in verse 20.

God specializes in meeting people who are hopeless. God specializes in meeting people who are broken. God specializes in meeting people who don't know where to turn next, don't even know what to do the next day. That's where God lives. God lives at the point of your sorrow.

Where are you going to find God? We don't often find Him in our successes. We don't often find Him in our happiness. We most often find God at the end of our rope. We most often find a home with God in our hopelessness.

They go a long time (v. 21) without food. Can you imagine eating a big meal and being tossed to and fro, to and fro, to and fro? They had no appetite. I've been on one cruise, on one cruise ship. And it was really, really nice. Of course, the food is fabulous. Cruises aren't about being on a ship or going places. The cruise is about the food, the best that I could tell. All you want, anything you want. No charge. No problem. They'll bring it to you. Delicious desserts. Eat until your heart is content.

Before I went on the cruise, people told me, "Don't worry. These ships are so big you won't even feel it move." Guess what? I felt it move. One night we were in a storm with eight-foot waves, which I'm sure is not that large of a wave for that big ship. But I began to turn green at supper that night. I could feel the ship move. In our cabin at night, the walls began to creak back and forth, creak and pop.

That's nothing compared to what Paul faced, because Paul was not on a cruise ship. This was a grain ship. No, there weren't 3,000 passengers. This was no luxury liner. This wasn't the Queen Mary II.

The ship drifts for 14 days. And Paul, in verse 21, gives them a little bit of that (aren't you glad you see it in Paul, too) "I told you so! You should have listened to me." "I told you let's not set sail. But no, you had to do it. Now look at the damage and loss. And yet, don't fret. While I said we'd lose life earlier, I want you to know that this very night an angel (verse 23) of the God to whom I belong and whom I serve stood before me, saying, 'Do not be afraid; you must stand before Caesar; and behold, God has granted you all those who are sailing with you.' Therefore, keep up your courage, for I believe it will turn out just exactly as I have been told. But we're going to run aground – we're going to run aground on a certain island."

Constant hopelessness. Fourteen nights. Driven about at the whim of the wind. But the sailors surmise they are close to land (verse 27). Some people say sailors can smell land. They drop and measure. They are at 20 fathoms – that's 120 feet deep. They go a little further and find it to be 15 fathoms. They know they are coming to a sandbar, they're coming to land. But they can't see it in the storm. They throw out the four anchors and wish for daylight.

Interestingly enough, in verse 30 some of the sailors who ought to be helping the passengers are trying to take the life boat and escape into the sea. But Paul catches them. He says to the Centurion, "Unless these men remain in the ship, you yourselves cannot be saved." And they listen to Paul. They listen to him this time, and they cut the ship and let it fall away.

While the captain of the Titanic, E. J. Smith, led the women and children to the lifeboats first while he, himself, went down with the ship, captains have not always been so noble.

Captain Francesco Schettino is accused of abandoning his ship, the Costa Concordia, after it capsized off the Tuscany coast in January 2012. What will likely never be forgotten about the Italian cruise liner disaster is the quickness with which the captain of the Costa Concordia abandoned the sinking ship.

According to investigators, captain Francesco Schettino maneuvered the ship, which was carrying more than 4,200 passengers and crew, too close to shore of the Tuscan Island of Giglio to "make a bow" to the locals. The "significant human error," as described by the ship's owner, Costa Cruises, caused the 114,500-ton liner to cap size just 500 feet from the shore, killing at least 11 people, while 24 remain missing. According to the Italian police, who detained Schettino on charges of manslaughter, failure to offer assistance and abandonment of the ship, the captain and some of the crew were among the first to bail into lifeboats.

Considered one of the most infamous crimes in maritime law, Schettino's act of cowardice has many precedents in history.

“The story of captains abandoning sinking passengers is as old as ships. They are only human.” Andrew Lambert, a professor of naval history at King’s College, London, told Discovery News.

Schettino, who denied all charges, is accused of having abandoned the ship at 11:30 p.m. while there were still about 230 people aboard – including two newborns and four disabled people who were not rescued until 2:00 a.m.

Coast Guard officers repeatedly urged the captain to return to the Concordia and coordinate the evacuation until everyone was safely on land, but he refused. “Please...it’s dark...,” Schettino cried, according to audio of telephone conversations.

“Listen Schettino, perhaps you have saved yourself from the sea but I will make you look very bad. I will make you pay for this. ...Go back on board,” Coast Guard Commander Gregorio Maria De Falco yelled. (Rossella Lorenzi, Discovery News, Jan 17, 2012)

“Eat up,” Paul says in verse 33. “You’re going to need your strength. Nobody is going to die.”

Verse 35

And he took bread and he thanked God in the presence of all; and he broke it and began to eat.

They were all encouraged. They ate, too. But they struck the reef (verse 41) and they ran the vessel aground.

The soldiers were ready to kill all the prisoners, including Paul, lest they escape. But the Centurion said, “No, let them jump overboard. Whoever can swim should be first off the ship, and the rest should follow.” Some grabbed a plank; others grabbed debris floating from the ship (verse 44). And they were all brought safely to land.

Pastor, how does this passage apply to me?

I want you to look at verse 25. Paul says, “Keep up your courage, for I believe God.”

This passage is about the sovereignty of God. In all the mistakes of their not listening to Paul, in all the error of Paul having been arrested in the first place – in all of this haphazard humanity, God is having His way. God wants Paul to go to Rome. Paul is going to Rome. No matter what poor decisions anyone else makes, God is having His way.

“Keep up your courage, for I believe in God.”

Some of you here this morning need to hear this message.

You’re going through a divorce. Keep your courage.

You have lost your job. Keep your courage.

You can’t sleep at night anymore because something is keeping you awake as you toss and turn on your bed of misery. Keep your courage.

God is sovereign. Believe in God, and all of your mistakes, all of your failures, and all those other things God will use to see you through to His end for you.

Keep your courage. Believe in God.