

“Straight Thinking in the Storm”

Acts 27:21-44

The Story: Paul’s Final Days

Martha Stringer

11/22/15

My daughter sounded the alarm: “Mom! It’s raining in the kitchen!”

In a flash it all came flooding back: I had started a faucet running, pulled up the sink stopper to fill it and then jumped ship in pursuit of scratching something else off my ever present to-do list. With a sick, sinking feeling I headed toward the kitchen engulfed with the understanding that my trusty to-do list just had an exponential growth spurt.

I was standing on a chair poking drain holes in the ceiling dry wall when the phone rang.

“You should see it Daddy!” quipped my little tempest. *“There’s water everywhere.”* Another revelation: wild arm flailing and throat cutting gestures are wasted on the very young.

“Disasters” whether they are woman-made like mine was, or naturally occurring, tend to stand out in our minds, don’t they?

We are just 8 days shy of the conclusion of the 2015 hurricane season which began June 1 and ends November 30.

This year was significant because it marked the 10-year anniversary of Katrina, one of the deadliest and costliest hurricanes ever to hit the United States. It is estimated over 1,800 people died in the hurricane and the flooding that followed in late August 2005, and millions of others were left homeless along the Gulf Coast and in New Orleans.

The first hurricane I can recall is Hurricane Agnes.

It was June 1972. At the time, it was the costliest and most destructive natural disaster in the United States. It received the nickname Hurricane Agony. The reason I remember it so well is because I was laid up on the couch. A few days earlier I was hitching a ride on my older sister’s bike.

She had a boy’s bike and I was sitting side saddle on that cross bar...wearing flip-flops...when my foot got tangled in the spokes. So from my vantage point on the couch recovering from my own personal storm I witnessed the ensuing chaos in my house as Hurricane Agony pounded eastern Pennsylvania with somewhere in the neighborhood of 10 inches of rain which ultimately flooded our basement.

Even with sophisticated equipment predicting hurricanes is not an exact science. In the event you find yourself in the path of an impending storm, according to the National Weather Service one of the most important ways to prepare is to know your evacuation route.

But what if you can’t escape your storm? How do we stand firm and think straight when there’s water everywhere and its rising? We recall the big storms like Agnes and Katrina but the reality is storms can strike at any time and without warning. And storms are equal opportunity destroyers. They don’t care if you’re poor or wealthy, what your nationality is, if you went to college or learned a trade or if you follow

Jesus. In fact Jesus tells us as much when he is explaining to his disciples about how the storm of his crucifixion will scatter them: "In this world you will have trouble." He told them. John 16:33-34

Storms will come. Like a flash of lightning your job is eliminated. A thunderclap of cancer shakes you to the bone. Your spouse jumps ship. An earthquake of terrorism shakes your foundation. How do you keep your head together when clear skies turn ominously dark and unexpected waves of doubt are pulling you under?

We're on Chapter 30 of The Story...Paul's final days. By now you would think that Paul would have paid all his dues after being unjustly jailed in Caesarea and the remainder of his ministry would be smooth sailing. But trouble is brewing. This chapter covers a lot of information.

We are going to look at Paul's journey to Rome, a voyage which begins innocuously enough but turns into one of the most frightening ordeals of Paul's life.

Paul is with Luke, who is the author of Acts and who, we have every reason to believe, was Paul's friend, and had been close to him during his imprisonment in Caesarea. In addition, there's Aristarchus who we learn earlier in Acts Paul met in Thessalonica and has probably been traveling with Paul since. Those 3 along with other prisoners and crew were loaded onto a ship under the guard of a centurion named Julius. All told there were 276 souls on board. They sailed uneventfully from Caesarea up around the island of Cyprus to Myra where they changed ships and boarded a cargo ship transporting grain from Egypt to Rome. This was no Carnival Cruise ship.

More like a big barge that would not be easy to maneuver in high wind and water. And the winds did indeed begin to turn against them. Luke writes:

"We made slow headway for many days and had difficulty arriving off Cnidus. When the wind did not allow us to hold our course, we sailed to the lee of Crete opposite Salmone. We moved along the coast with difficulty and came to a place called Fair Havens..." Acts 27: 7-8

Luke tells us that they were stuck in Fair Havens for a considerable time – probably about 3 months which means it's late fall. If they sail now, the remaining leg of this journey will be in hurricane season and take them into winter. But, despite its name, where they were, Fair Havens, was not a fair place to wait out the violent winter storms. So they have a decision to make. Should they stay put or risk a voyage to the more secure harbor of Phoenix on the western tip?

Though he was a prisoner, Paul voices his opinion – boldly – The Story says Paul "warned" the crew but some versions say he began to "admonish them."

"Men, I can see that our voyage is going to be disastrous and bring great loss to ship and cargo, and to our own lives also" (Acts 27:10). We read earlier that Julius the Centurion has shown kindness to Paul and had mostly likely grown fond of him. His integrity, maturity and godliness distinguished him from the other prisoners. However, a Centurion does not take advice from a prisoner. Since the pilot and ship owner were anxious to find a safer dock, they agreed to strike out for Phoenix.

When Julius decided to go with the majority rather than listen to Paul's advice, it was a disastrous decision. Luke writes, "Before long a wind of hurricane force – what they called the Euraquilo and what we call a Northeaster swept down from the island. The ship was caught by the storm and could not head into the wind; so we gave way to it and were driven along." Acts 27:14-16

Those hurricane force winds pushed them far out to sea. The storm enveloped them in total darkness for two weeks. No sun to light the way. No stars to steer by at night.

Luke gives us such detail: “We took such a violent battering from the storm that the next day they began to throw the cargo overboard. On the third day they threw the ships tackle overboard with their own hands. When neither sun nor stars appeared for many days and the storm continued raging, we finally gave up all hope of being saved.”

Have you been there? Feeling your situation is about as impossible as it can get? Just like the sailors and passengers on Paul’s ill-fated ship you may be feeling like you should give up all hope of being saved. What can you do? Throw out the anchor – in fact throw out 4 of them. That’s what Luke tells us the crew on the ship did. “Fearing that we would be dashed against the rocks, they (the sailors) dropped four anchors from the stern and prayed for daylight. “

And Paul threw out four anchors for the crew.

First, Paul threw out the **anchor of encouragement**: Paul stays steady in the violent tossing of the seas. He starts out by sorta saying “I told you so”

“...Paul stood up before them and said: ‘Men, you should have taken my advice not to sail from Crete; then you would have spared yourselves this damage and loss.’”

But he also encouraged them. “But I also encourage you to keep up your courage, because not one of you will be lost; only the ship will be destroyed,” Acts 27:21-22 Paul could be confident in such a hopeless situation because he had received another vision from God.

“Last night an angel of the God whose I am and whom I serve stood beside me and said, ‘Do not be afraid, Paul. You must stand trial before Caesar; and God has graciously given you the lives of all who sail with you.’ So keep up your courage, men, for I have faith in God that it will happen just as he told me. “ Acts 27:25-26

Aren’t those sailors lucky they’ve got such an example of courage and encouragement as Paul on board? The storms of life aren’t meant to be weathered alone. God will put people in our lives at the right time and at the right place who will be with us through the storm. For all of those 276 souls on board that person was Paul. Has God put people in your life to encourage you? Can you be an encourager to others when they’re in a stormy situation? Paul could offer encouragement because he trusted God’s promises completely. He trusted God even when the situation seemed hopeless.

Second, Paul threw out an **anchor of calm**. One of the worst things you can do in a disaster situation, even though you are afraid, is panic, which is essentially the manifestation of the fear and the act of trying desperately to gain control you do not have.

Not only is panic one of the lead causes of drowning – it makes it extremely difficult for others to help you because you may pull them down with you. Panic also can cause us to develop an “abandon-ship - every man for himself mentality.” Which, after 14 days is exactly what happened to the sailors. Paul recognizes the panic is rising and he offers some straight thinking advice.

“...In an attempt to escape from the ship, the sailors let the lifeboat down into the sea, pretending they were going to lower some anchors from the bow. Then Paul said to the centurion and the soldiers, “Unless these men stay with the ship, you cannot be saved.” So the soldiers cut the ropes that held the lifeboat and let it drift away. Acts 27:29-32

In conjunction with the anchor of calm Paul throws out an **anchor of surrender**. But I want to be clear about surrender – it is not the same thing as giving up hope.

Ginger Babin is the author of “The Water-Shy Swimmer” She is a former Red Cross Water Safety Instructor (WSI), having taught swimming and life saving for nineteen years.

She shared this story on her website: ‘ When I was a teenager, a girl I knew and two of her friends drowned in the ocean. Four girls on a church outing playing in the surf were swept away by an undertow. Only one of the girls was rescued. Several years later, I was chatting with a saleswoman and commented that I liked to swim. The woman asked if Ginger recalled reading about the three girls who had drowned at a local beach a few years back. Ginger said yes – in fact I knew one of them.

I was the girl who was rescued that day the saleswoman told me. And she confided in me she never knew how to swim! Intrigued, I asked how she survived. She said that the other three knew how to swim and attempted to reach shore by swimming against the flow. By the time rescue teams reached them they were so exhausted and they couldn't be revived.

I was terrified at first, she said. But since I couldn't swim and there was nothing I could do about it I simply gave up and prayed. Without putting up a struggle, she let the current sweep her out to sea. When the undertow played itself out she realized that she was floating and slowly moving toward shore. A rescuer spotted her and pulled her to safety. (<http://thewatershyswimmer.com/Ch6.html>)

The sailors not only had to let go of the fear. After Paul tells them they need to stay with the ship they realized they had to surrender their idea of how they might be saved. “So the soldiers cut the ropes that held the lifeboat and let it drift away.” Acts 27:29-32

They cut away the life boats! And earlier Luke told us they threw the tackle overboard which is what they needed to steer the ship! They have to trust in God’s plan for saving them as God promised Paul he would.

Finally, Paul throws out an **anchor of thanksgiving**.

The only precious freight left was the grain. The owner tried to hold onto this as long as possible. By the dawn of the fifteenth day even the harvest was about to get the heave-ho. But Paul offered some more straight thinking advice. He urged everyone on the ship to eat. They needed strength. Soon, they would have to swim to the shore.

‘For the last fourteen days you have been in constant suspense and have gone without food – you haven’t eaten anything. Now I urge you to take some food. You need it to survive. Not one of you will lose a single hair from his head.’ After he said this, he took some bread and gave thanks to God in front of them all. Then he broke it and began to eat. They were all encouraged and ate some food themselves. All together there were 276 of us on board. When they had eaten as much as they wanted, they lightened the ship by throwing the grain into the sea.” Acts 27 33-38

The bread was precious to Paul. But more precious by far was the presence of Jesus. That’s why Paul used that bread to share communion with His fellow passengers. All 276 of various different faiths, bowed their heads, prayed and received the peace of God by giving thanks.

“On the fifteenth day, the storm gave way to a glimmer of dawn. A tiny spit of land appeared on the horizon. By now, the creaking, battered hull was held together with rapidly fraying ropes. Snapping the drag anchors, the sailors hoisted the foresail and tried to run the boat aground. Miraculously, they

avoided the rocks and stuck fast in a sandbar. The old barge began to collapse under the pounding surf. Suddenly, the soldiers unsheathed their knives. It was standard procedure, in such a crisis, to kill all the prisoners. If a soldier failed to prevent an escape, he forfeited his own life. But just as the knife reached Paul's neck, Julius the commander cried, 'Stop!' He couldn't murder the man who courageously kept them from going over the brink. 'Unlock their shackles. If you can swim, jump overboard and swim to land. The rest grab a plank and float to shore.' "In this way," Luke concludes, "everyone reached land in safety" (v. 44). Just as Paul promised, just as God said, all 276 souls survived.

Last Friday in Paris 129 souls were not able to escape their storms as those equal-opportunity explosions tsumani-ed the world with fear and panic. We will never understand why storms like that come. We will not be able to control them. We may not be able to escape them.

But when those storms come, we can, as Paul did, (SLIDE)

- encourage or be encouraged by others,
- stay calm,
- surrender to God and
- give Him thanks.

That way, we can hold on to the one anchor of our souls that will keep our paths straight: Jesus. He told his follower that storms would come, "In this world you will have trouble." He told them. And he also encouraged them by saying: "But take heart! I have overcome the world!" John 16:33-34

His message for you and me as we endure our storms is the same one Paul had for his shipmates: "Keep up your courage for I have faith in God" (Acts 27:25).

Amen