



Shipwrecked

TEXT
Acts 27:27-44

November 22, 2020 — Sermon by Rev. Zach Walker

I don't think it will shock you to confess: I'm not a sailor. I'm shaky on terms like bow and stern. If you were to tell me you left something on the starboard side of a ship, I am just going to look around the whole ship. If I'm honest, I giggle a little at the term "poop deck."

Yeah, I'm not a sailor. But I have some experience with storms.

I remember growing up in Georgia when powerful spring thunderstorms would roll in, and my family would gather together in a windowless hallway on the ground floor of our basement-less house, tuning in to the national weather service radio, waiting for the all-clear signal, unsure of what was happening, having been deprived of all our senses save for the sound of intense wind, rain and thunder outside what was, on any other day, the security of our sturdy house which now seemed pitifully fragile in the face of nature.

I've been caught in storms while on a bike — both as a kid and as an adult. One time in particular, my family was visiting relatives in Atlanta, and my brothers and one of my cousins decided to pedal our way up the steep roads of their mountainous neighborhood to the water and

radio towers at the top, failing to notice the gathering clouds overhead. We didn't think anything of the light drizzle until we heard a dramatic change in pitch behind us. We turned to see a wall of water falling from the sky, which overtook us immediately. In a panic, we rushed downhill and directly into it, descending at breakneck speeds on our bikes — while also discovering that standard bike brakes don't work at all in those wet conditions. We hung on with white knuckles and fear-bitten adrenaline all the way down.

I've been caught in storms more than once while in a canoe in northern Minnesota — the most severe (but not the most recent) of which involved striking out into open water while lightning flashed closer than we would like. And a gale force headwind meant our best, most strenuous efforts at paddling were rewarded with an inch-at-a-time crawl, a thorough soaking and some serious doubt about the situation ending without capsizing our little two-person vessel into chilly waters.

And there are, of course, storms that aren't storms of rain and thunder. There are the storms of losing a job; the destructive lightning flash of the death of a loved one; the howling winds

of a worst-case diagnosis; the dark skies of an injury and all its future implications; the constant rain of stress and anxiety that can overtake hope with uncertainty and fear.

So I'm no sailor, and I've never been shipwrecked in the way we read about today, and I'd guess you haven't either. But I think this story isn't so much one of being at sea so much as it is being at the mercy of a storm. I'd wager we all know something about storms — literal or not — and we know enough about their power to be realistic about the destruction they can wreak.

The narrative plays out with one emergency after another; it reads almost like the plot to a seafaring action movie. They set sail at the tail end of the safe sailing season — ominous from the beginning. When the storm does hit it is one of historic proportions. After days, they eventually sense they are approaching shallow water — naturally at midnight, when it's too dark to really know how to proceed — so they drop anchor and tensely wait for daylight. The ship's crew attempts to flee on a lifeboat, only for soldiers to cut the ropes before the scheme comes to fruition.

There's a snack break as they wait out the night, and when day-

light finally breaks, they decide on a desperate course of action: hoping they could make it, they would steer to shore and run the ship aground. But of course the plan literally runs aground, hitting a reef on the way, and the ship begins to break apart. It's the soldiers' turn to consider extreme measures, proposing to kill all the prisoners¹, but they are convinced by one of their own to stay their hands. Their last option is upon them: Everyone abandons ship, swimming or holding onto planks and detritus, and in some translations, hanging on to each other, and they make their way to shore — all 276 of them — sailors, and soldiers and prisoners alike.

And I wonder, after all that, how they looked at one another on that beach as they realized what they had just survived, covered in sand and salt water, breathless at the ordeal of it, washed up on an unfamiliar shore that was their salvation. The storm, in a way, had been their equalizer. What would happen now?

It makes me think about the fragile ship that is a Thanksgiving table, where a different kind of crew gathers with the potential for stormy weather. Has Thanksgiving ever been so fraught with the possibility of conversational storms, whether virtual or in person? I don't want to underplay the very real, complex dynamics of your family, which I know often carries relationships charged with personal, emotional, critical content. But I've been reflecting lately on the ways in which I have been fooled into letting stormy conversations dictate my relationships rather than my rela-

tionships dictating the conversation. Or, maybe more hopefully, aspiring to integrate the love we are shown in Christ — and my proclaimed relationship with Christ — to dictate both my other relationships and the tenor of those conversations. I'm not sure when I began taking it so personally that someone might have different opinions than I do. I'm not sure when I began to abdicate God's call to love both friends and enemies (and surely family falls somewhere between the two ends of that spectrum) based on what surely must sound to God as the flimsy argument that we just don't see eye to eye.

So there, around that Thanksgiving table — or really in any gathering, just like on the ship, there are sailors, soldiers and prisoners — which is to say there's always a mix of priorities and failures and agendas — not to mention fears, losses, inadequacies, regrets, hopes, failures. And before we start categorizing who in your family is a sailor, or soldier, or prisoner, it is, I think, more faithful to own how each of us is all three given the right circumstances. As much as I might claim the role of prisoner, I am just as often a sailor who is willing, given the chance, to hop in the lifeboat and forsake everyone. Or I can become the soldier, ready to kill off a relationship out of desperation or exhaustion.

So thank God for Paul. Thank God for the voice that insists, despite all their differences, that they might actually all survive together — in fact, that they would *only* survive together. Maybe Paul just realized that if someone died,

there was a sense in which none of them would really survive the ordeal — at least not without the consequence of living with the shame, which is its own kind of death.

I think Paul saw it for what it was. I think Paul had a lifetime of learning over and over that God wants us to see the humanity of each other, or that loving God necessitates seeing, insisting on, each other's sacred humanity. That we need to question the impulse to judge others or just stop assuming we know someone's history, pains, regrets and joys, their challenges when we could instead ask them to share it with us.

Maybe you noticed earlier that I kind of breezed past the snack break on the ship. It's that part where Paul all but forces everyone to stop and eat: "After [Paul] 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." It isn't explicitly communion, but what meal, when shared together in the face of an uncertain future, isn't communion? And what future is ever really all that certain? Will Willimon writes, communion "is food of confidence shared in the middle of the storm."² Sailors, soldiers and prisoners alike, they shared that meal, that communion, together and they were all encouraged.

I'm not trying to pretend all their differences dropped away, but that shared meal might have reminded them of their shared fate. Their differences remained

real. Our differences remain real — but the seeming import of those differences which made them and us in some respects adversarial, tend to fade away when we understand someone to be as a fellow traveler, subject to the same storms that life brings — or as someone who has borne the brunt of storms I have not. More than that, rather than seeing each other as adversaries, we might see the real adversary is the storm, or the fragility of the ship. Or in our own inability to see another's life being as valuable as our own. And so, failing that, we try to save ourselves. We try to lower our own lifeboat, thinking we will somehow be safer in those stormy waters aboard a dinghy by ourselves than aboard an anchored ship shared with people different than us. We fail to see that the real goal is, and always has been, to make it to land together rather as the lone survivor.

Abraham Lincoln is known to have said, "I don't like that man. I must get to know him better." I like the implication that the work to be done is mine, not theirs. That reconciliation begins with and relies upon relationship building. The world could all use more of that, more people willing to insist that we all survive together.

Author Michael Chabon writes, "The true scarcity we face is of practicing adults, of people who know how marginal, how fragile, how finite their lives and their stories and their ambitions really are but who find value in this knowledge, even a sense of strange comfort, because they know their condition is universal, is shared."³

Is that what happened as they ate, listening to the storm rage on that ship? Did they all realize how marginal, fragile and finite — how shared — their lives were?

The sailors were tempted to save themselves on the lifeboat. The soldiers were tempted to kill the prisoners. No doubt the prisoners were tempted, perhaps, to take over the ship or to escape. What stopped them from seizing those temptations? Wisdom? Perspective? Maybe. But, according to the text, it ultimately came down to one person's concern and compassion for someone they didn't entirely agree with: Paul saw the sailors would be doomed in the raft, and one soldier's interest for Paul made him argue for the lives of all the prisoners.

So I don't know what your life or your Thanksgiving will look like. For many of us, the celebrations will be smaller than usual. But the temptation within our splintered society, vying for survival at the expense of others, still looms in a way that feels more real, or more consequential this year. When daylight broke after their meal, they saw land they didn't recognize, but they knew it would be their salvation if they could get there. Swimming, paddling and clinging, they all abandoned ship. Is it too late for us to make it to land together? Is it too late to arrive at a place that is at once unfamiliar and new, but also what we immediately recognize as salvation?

Much like Paul and his companions when they jumped off the boat, I don't know the answer to that question. But I hope it isn't too late. I hope we are willing,

in light of and not in denial of, all our differences to proclaim thanks. I hope I have the courage in the face of whatever storm rages around me — whether in the sea of life or at shared table of circumstance — to insist that no relationship should be sacrificed as a result of my own prejudiced verdict.

They collapsed on shore. They were wet. They were exhausted. And true to Paul's word, they were alive. Their differences were still there, but I think they regarded each other differently. They were now survivors together, with lots of work ahead of them.

Thank goodness all of them had eaten something for the journey.

¹It wasn't unreasonable. Standard practice if a prisoner escaped was that the Roman centurion would suffer the fate that was intended for the prisoner. (William Barclay, *Daily Study Bible Series: Acts of the Apostles [Revised Edition]*, published 1976, p. 186)

²William H. Willimon, *Interpretation Commentary: Acts*, 1988, p. 185

³Michael Chabon, *Manhood for Amateurs*, pp. 236–237

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.