



SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

June 8, 2014

"It Is Well" - Acts 27:13-44

The Rev. Dr. Drew Hulse

What an incredible day today is in so many ways. We are getting ready to experience an amazing day in our church's history. Years from now this day will be talked about as legend and what God does among us. Our prayer is that ours is the story of a people seeking to be faithful to God's call upon their lives as a church and as the people of God.

How appropriate it is that we have been working through the Book of Acts and being encouraged, as we have seen the faithfulness of God's people as they responded to God's call upon them.

Specifically, we have been following the story of Paul and his trip to Rome to proclaim the Gospel. We have also had some wonderful interruption with Youth Sunday and Pastor Dan's historic sermon last week calling us to embrace the future.

Now, we once again pick up Luke's narrative in Acts about Paul's journey to Rome. To help focus us back, let me review some quick highlights that Pastor Tim has brought us through.

Acts 19:21 - Paul expresses his desire to proclaim the Gospel in Rome

Acts 21:17 - Paul arrives in Jerusalem

Acts 21:27 - Paul arrested in the temple in Jerusalem

Acts 22 - Paul gives his testimony to all the people

Acts 22:27 - Paul announces his Roman citizenship

Acts 23 - Paul testifies before the council

Acts 23:12 - Plot to kill Paul established

Acts 23:23 - Paul sent to Felix the Governor

Acts 24 - Paul before Felix at Caesarea

Acts 24:27 - Paul held in prison for two years

Acts 25:6 - Paul appears before Fetus

Acts 25:11 - Paul appeals to Caesar

Acts 26 - Paul's defense before King Agrippa

Acts 26:32 - Agrippa declares Paul's innocence, but on to Caesar

Acts 27:1 - Paul and Luke set sail for Rome

Acts 27 records the beginning of Paul's sail to Rome. He is accompanied by Luke and Aristarchus. It's not the normal prisoner who gets to have two traveling companions, but it probably speaks to the high regard for Paul as he was known around Asia Minor. And since it is Luke who is writing, everything within the account is written in the first person plural.

Somehow, it seems I have ended up with the travel log passages again! In our verses Paul is delivered to a Centurion by the

name of Julius, whose job is to see Paul safely to Rome. They put out from Caesarea on a small local ship and begin to make their way up the coast through multiple ports until they land at Myra of Lycia. It is here in Myra that Julius moves the three of them to an Alexandrian ship sailing for Italy.

The Alexandrian ship was a commercial cargo vessel and part of a trade route that shipped corn and wheat to Italy to keep the huge Roman Empire fed. It was a much larger ship, and as Luke records later, carried 276 passengers on this trip. The trip proceeded slowly as the sailing season was coming to an end and they finally put in at a port called Fair Havens on the southern coast of Crete.

It is now that the trip begins to get interesting. Luke tells us that "The Fast" has passed and the sailing season is getting dangerous. Paul shares his opinion with the pilot, the ship's captain, and Julius that they should stay put and winter there. Paul warns that if they go all will be lost, even their lives.

The fast Luke is referring to is the Jewish Day of Atonement. In the year 59 AD, the day of the fast would have been October 5th. Weather-wise, the sailing season ended in mid-September and anything after November 1st was considered deadly.

Already at risk because of the late date, Paul argues they should stay in Fair Havens rather than risk going on to Phoenix.

The problem with Fair Havens was that it was an open bay and not suitable for winter harbor. Much like Hanalei Bay, it is beautiful in the summer, but once the winter north swell comes in, you don't want to be harbored there.

Luke is giving us insight into Paul's standing as he was invited into a conversation with the pilot, the ship's captain, and the Centurion to make a decision. Paul gives a dire warning, to them all in verse ten: *"Men, I perceive that the voyage will certainly be with damage and great loss, not only of the cargo and the ship, but also of our lives."*

But the warning was not heeded and the decision was made to sail for Phoenix, a short 100 miles along the coast. If they could make it to Phoenix they would have safe harbor for the winter.

Verse 13 tells us that after a nice, moderate south wind came up, they weighed anchor and began sailing along Crete, close to shore—what should be a one to two day trip at most.

Some critics have wondered why Luke would take an entire chapter of his letter to write about a sailing trip. They argue that there is nothing theological about the writing, so why waste the space with just a travel log?

Go down the aisle of any bookstore today and you will find the shelves filled with what? Murder mysteries and political intrigue. We love a good "who done it" story. In Luke's time, people loved to hear of great

sailing voyages, especially ones that involved shipwrecks. And it was also believed that a shipwreck was seen as judgment upon the person.

So now, Luke, who has taken many of the voyages with Paul, takes on the role of the Old Salt, the grizzled sailor, who is going to tell us a tale. *"Avast there mateys! It be too late to alter course."*

Okay, it's not Pirates of the Caribbean, but Luke has a story to tell and a reason to tell it as he wants people to see the greatness and faithfulness of God.

What started out as a gentle breeze takes a turn in **Acts 27:14-16**. **14** *But before very long there rushed down from the land a violent wind, called Euraquilo; 15 and when the ship was caught in it and could not face the wind, we gave way to it and let ourselves be driven along. 16* *Running under the shelter of a small island called Claudia, we were scarcely able to get the ship's boat under control.*

Luke tells us that the calm winds had suddenly become a violent wind called Eurquilo, or literally, a Northeaster. If you've lived in Southern California and experienced the Santa Ana winds you have an idea.

Now off of the 7,000 foot high peaks on Crete, a violent wind storm is on them and all they can do is let the ship run in the wind while trying to save the ship's emergency boat.

Acts 27:17 - 17 *After they had hoisted it up, they used supporting cables in undergirding the ship; and fearing that they might run aground on the shallows of Syrtis, they let down*

the sea anchor and in this way let themselves be driven along

The crew was using all of their collective nautical skills just to survive. You remember the pirate phrase, "Shiver me timbers" which refers to the ship coming apart? To keep this from happening they secured the boat, undergirded the ship with cables so it wouldn't split apart, and even threw out the sea anchor to try and slow the ship down—knowing they were near Syrtis, the Bermuda Triangle of sandbars off the coast of Libya.

Luke continues in **Acts 27:18-20**. **18** *The next day as we were being violently storm-tossed, they began to jettison the cargo; 19 and on the third day they threw the ship's tackle overboard with their own hands. 20* *Since neither sun nor stars appeared for many days, and no small storm was assailing us, from then on all hope of our being saved was gradually abandoned.*

The translation, "We are all going to die!"

It is at this point that we get what some might call one of the best "I told you so's" in all of history. If only you had listened!

Acts 27:21-26 - 21 *When they had gone a long time without food, then Paul stood up in their midst and said, "Men, you ought to have followed my advice and not to have set sail from Crete and incurred this damage and loss. 22* *Yet now I urge you to keep up your courage, for there will be no loss of life among you, but only of the ship. 23* *For this very night an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I serve stood before me, 24* *saying, 'Do not be afraid, Paul; you must stand before Caesar.*

And behold, God has granted you all those who are sailing with you.' **25** Therefore, keep up your courage, men, for I believe God that it will turn out exactly as I have been told. **26** But we must run aground on a certain island."

This is far more than an "I told you so." It is Paul proclaiming to all on board that the God whom he serves is faithful. Even in the midst of the storm, when humanly there seems to be no hope and all is lost, God is faithful and He has them in His hands.

God's promise doesn't mean an immediate release from challenges. It wasn't all of a sudden sunshine and rainbows. In fact, the next verse tells us they were blown across the Adriatic Sea for 14 nights before there was any sense of approaching land.

To save some time here, let me just tell you that after taking depth readings and finding out they were now in 90 feet of water, the ship's crew set four anchors off the stern to try to hold the ship. Then they try to sneak off the ship to save themselves, but Paul spoils the attempt. After the cowardice of the crew, Paul becomes the encourager to all who are on board.

Acts 27:33-38 - 33 *Until the day was about to dawn, Paul was encouraging them all to take some food, saying, "Today is the fourteenth day that you have been constantly watching and going without eating, having taken nothing. 34 Therefore I encourage you to take some food, for this is for your preservation, for not a hair from the head of any of you will perish." 35 Having said this, he took bread and gave thanks to God in the presence of all, and he broke it and began to eat. 36 All of them were encouraged and they*

themselves also took food. 37 All of us in the ship were two hundred and seventy-six persons. 38 When they had eaten enough, they began to lighten the ship by throwing out the wheat into the sea.

Paul, confident of God's promise to Him proclaims to all in the midst of the storm, that none of them will be harmed. And then, in front of all, he took bread and gave thanks to God. Paul made it clear this was not about him. All glory and honor belonged to God.

Finally, day breaks and they can see land, but none of them recognize it. They don't know it yet, but they have been blown 475 nautical miles across the sea and now have the island of Malta before them.

The decision is to cast off the anchors and drive the ship onto the beach, but before they can make it, they run into a reef and the ship begins to break apart. All appears to be lost so the soldiers plan to kill the prisoners so none could escape. You can imagine the panic onboard as it all starts to come apart.

In the midst of the turmoil, when all seemed lost, Luke tells us it is the Centurion, Julius, who convinced them not to kill Paul and the other prisoners. Julius commands all who can swim to jump overboard and swim to shore and the rest should follow on planks and flotsam from the ship.

And then Luke concludes the story in **Acts 27:44b**: "And so it happened that they all were brought safely to land."

Luke ends his story with a twist that the reader would never

expect. Rather than seeing the storm and shipwreck as judgment against a wrong doer, a guilty man, it was a testimony to the providence of God and His watchful care over the faithful.

This harrowing account is more than great story. It teaches us:

1. Even in the storms of life, God is faithful.

Paul knew what God had revealed to him and the circumstances around him were not going to tell him otherwise.

2. The power of witness is lived out in crisis.

Who knows how many conversations Paul had with Julius in their time together, but the effect was that Julius believed Paul and took a stand against all to defend him. Others are watching us as we go through the tough times and God will use them as an opportunity to share.

3. The King always has one more move.

Yes, I borrowed that one, because it's true. Though the people thought all was lost, God still had a plan to bring them through, and God will continue to work out His plan in our lives, even if we think all is lost.

Today we are part of a historic vote. This journey of ours might well be compared to a great sea voyage.

At times there have been mighty winds blowing and we haven't been 100% sure of where we would end up. Would we run aground? Would we make it to the destination? The answers have not always been clear.

But what has been clear is that God has called us to faithfulness and to trust Him. And praise God, through the leadership of the Session, through the Discernment Team, through Pastor Dan, the voice of God has continually been heard—the call to be faithful and to trust Him.

As we take the next steps together, we don't know all the answers with 100% assurance. Personally, I'd prefer not to be dashed upon the rocks. But one thing I know for sure. If we remain faithful to God's call upon our lives, then we can sing with confidence the great hymn of faith, "It Is Well With My Soul."

Written by Horatio Spafford, a man who understood the pain of tragedy at sea, having lost four of his children in the sinking of the steamship they were traveling on, Spafford knew that as long as he was in God's will, he could sing with confidence of God's mercy and grace.

*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.*

Whatever comes our way, even the unknowns, we can proclaim, "It is well; it is well with our souls."

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Sunday sermon texts are also available at fpchawaii.org. The audio version can be downloaded from iTunes. It can also be sent to you by e-mail. You may also request the free audio version by visiting: fpchkoolau@gmail.com