

Help You Survive Timothy L. Carson

Acts 27: 33-36 July 29, 2018

Once when I was on the underwater section of an archaeological dig in Caesarea, Israel, I was operating the underwater dredge. This underwater vacuum is designed to suck up sand and spit it out away from your work site. As I was using the dredge on the sea floor and sand moved away I was suddenly staring at ancient ship's timbers. I was ecstatic and surfaced to share the good news with the supervisor. When I did he laughed and said, "So what? There are hundreds, thousands of ships that have gone down in the Mediterranean over the centuries. Go back to your job."

I was embarrassed and disheartened. As a novice I had become overly excited about nothing. But that mistake told me plenty about the history of those waters, namely, that the ocean floor was littered with the debris of shipwrecks. And that fits with our story this morning from the Book of Acts.

Paul has been arrested and is being transported to Rome via water. Leaving from the very port I spent a summer on the dig, Caesarea, he headed westward on a cargo ship from port to port toward his destination. From the rediscovered cargo of those many shipwrecks we know what they were carrying and where they were heading: Olive oil from Spain heading east; wine from Italy heading to Africa; wheat from Egypt heading to Rome. In fact, Paul's last ride was a cargo ship full of wheat.

In this scene Paul is catching one of the last ships to sail before winter sets in and all the ships moor in harbors. A sudden nor'easter blows in and not even skilled sailing along island coastlines can save them. Unable to turn into the wind they are blown off course. The storm is so violent they eventually empty the hold and throw the wheat overboard. The gear goes over in time. The storm went on for days until hope seemed lost. And then the most amazing thing happened.

Like in the rest of the book of Acts it's always time for another speech.

Paul stands and addresses the crew. He tells them that the Spirit has reassured him that not a man will perish even though the ship will be lost. Since it is God's will that Paul ends up standing before the Emperor in Rome all those accompanying Paul will make it safely as well.

And then in the middle of the night of the fourteenth day, just before dawn, Paul urges everyone to eat in order to build up their strength. Without it they will not be able to survive. But the strange-sounding language we hear next is strikingly familiar: "He took bread, and giving thanks to God in the presence of all, he broke it and began to eat." Of course, it's very formulaic language; this is the early language of the Lord's Table.

Is this a strange moment to break out a communion service? On the edge of shipwreck? Because in just a few moments the ship will run aground and the violent waves rip the ship apart. Abandon ship, every man for himself!

Though the entire crew makes it ashore in one piece, the ship sinks to the bottom, down where the timbers from a thousand unnamed ships rest beneath the sands of time.

What do you do when the storms of life come your way? When the ship you were sailing is hit broadside by gale force? Where do you turn? What do you do?

In this Biblical story we see what can actually happen; what seemed to be stable and dependable turns into chaos. And we are left with the only real choice, to abandon ship and plunge into the waters of uncertainty, to swim or sink, to ride the debris, to leave the known for the unknown. This is the risky and uncertain choice we have when the storms come.

So I ask you, isn't this an odd time to break out the communion bread on deck, there with the waves crashing and the crew facing certain destruction? Or is that just the *right* time?

You could ask the same question of lots of situations.

Isn't it an odd time to break for communion on the way into battle?

Isn't it an odd time to break for communion when your life is falling apart?

Isn't it an odd time to break for communion when you could be doing something practical?

Paul's answer is no, this is exactly the right time to break for physical and spiritual nourishment. In fact, without it you won't be able to stand the test.

Tending to the soul is the most important thing.

I am remembering the words of Desmond Tutu, Archbishop in South African during the most grueling of years. When someone asked him how in the world he could keep up with the inhumane schedule he was keeping he said, "I will just need to set apart more time for prayer."

It is a counterintuitive response, isn't it? Add something else in? Add in worship? Add in another time for prayer? Add in communion? Yes, add it in to make the rest endurable. Slow down to catch up.

Does that work?

I've been reading accounts of those who survived the attack on the twin towers in New York. For those who were in the towers and able to evacuate, the difference between survival and perishing was often just minutes. A momentary hesitation, a wrong choice, stopping to wait, often resulted in not making it out.

Surely this is not the same story aboard ship with Paul. The interruption he suggested was not a substitute for action and didn't delay what they had to do. It took place *before* the time of action, a *preparation* for what they were facing.

In this story the prisoner, Paul, becomes chaplain and guide. He gives them hope. He insists they stop and tend to their bodies and souls.

He draws the community together for mutual support. And there is found an answer for us, too:

- Visualize a hopeful future, even if the wind and waves obscure it now.
- Slow down and center yourself; pause to re-fuel and tend to body and soul; you can help no one if you only know exhaustion and hopelessness.
- Come together to face the foe; we can face together what we cannot face alone; share wisdom with each other, especially with the one who will not and cannot see a way out now.

All this is experienced by Christians every time we gather around a table with Christ at the center, remembering who we are and whose we are. “You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.” (Ps 23)

Here’s the mystery of communion on deck:

When we’re in the middle of the storm our eyes are generally cast upon the threat of the waves. We either want to run, fight or freeze in place. In many circumstances those all have their place to help us survive. But in the middle of the storm what we really need is the transcendent referent; we need to know and trust a power greater than our own and greater than the storm itself. We need to lift our eyes above the storm to the great eternal power of the universe.

In that still place we can do much. We can let go of the many things we cling to, like ships that are about to break up. When we let go we become able to take the plunge into God’s providence. The swim to the shore seems perilous, but we can do it and there is a new life awaiting us, whatever form it may take. Be still my soul.

Sometimes it takes a storm to stop us or redirect us. Sometimes not even a storm can derail the purposes of God; it only delays it. And sometimes a storm gives rise to communion on deck, the turning to God when no other power will do.

And that is my prayer for you. Whatever storm it is that you are passing through now or will pass through, I pray that the power of the spirit within guides you in the midst of the chaos, that you are allowed to look beyond the suffering of the present moment to God's future and promises; that you can pause, slow down and center yourself in the Presence of God; and that you will turn to others to overcome these challenges.

There is power in the table of Christ in the storm.
There is power in its hope and transforming love.
There is power with the whole family of God gathered around the bread of life and wine of the spirit.

Thanks be to God, Amen.