

OCTOBER 30, 2022

# *Marion* weekly update

## FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH



### BIBLE STUDY Acts 27

This chapter of Acts is an adventure of a transition from Paul in Jerusalem to Paul in Rome. Agrippa has had a favorable audience with him, yet because of Paul's insistence on a trial with Caesar he couldn't release him. Instead Paul's fate is bound to Rome. Still considered a prisoner he climbs aboard a ship that will eventually transfer him to another for the purpose of crossing the sea to his destination.

Notable is that Luke writes that Paul is accompanied by others that he knows. Similar to his imprisonment with Felix for two years where his companions were permitted to come and go and minister to him, now his friends are able to travel with him to Rome. We don't know for sure why this is. Perhaps it is because he is a Roman citizen and given his earlier treatment he is conferred a special status amongst the prisoners. Perhaps he's simply cultivated favor. Regardless he is allowed travelling partners.

We also see that Julius, the centurion, has a favorable view of Paul. One wouldn't expect a prisoner to be allowed to walk off at a point of port and to hang out with his buddies, yet this is exactly what happens at Sardis. To us it may seem odd given our stricter sense of what it means to "transport a prisoner". We have to remember that this is a different time and place. It's not known to us how many other prisoners there were. Paul's made no secret of his desire and intention to go to Rome, and it seems he's been a model "prisoner" for years now. Perhaps given his nature it took some pressure off to allow him some liberties while they focused on the other prisoners they were transporting.

Luke provides significant details through this chapter about the voyage. The islands, where the ship sailed past them, the nature of the winds, the time of year, how they tried to navigate the difficult waters, all of it to those familiar with the region and the seas would have known not just the specifics but that Luke is also accurate. These details serve to make Luke a reliable storyteller.

Consider conversations you may have had on topics about which you are knowledgeable. Someone may speak with "authority" in their voice but in relative vagueness about the subject. It becomes quickly apparent that they don't really know what they are talking about. Conversely, if you speak with someone who can hang with the conversation, sharing details and specifics relevant to the matter at hand and not needing prompting they establish through the detail that they are in fact credible.

Luke is credible.

Though while Luke may be, the crew and soldiers don't seem to find Paul to be so himself. Paul is an experienced traveler on the seas. He knows the time of year and the patterns. He warns them that trouble is waiting for them if they go on. They don't listen. Why would they? To them Paul is a mere prisoner with no real standing. Let the pilot and the crew make the call. They are the experts, not Paul.

As they travel on, the seas become rough and the winds become deadly. Suddenly we have a circumstance not unlike Jonah.

In both stories the seas become treacherous. The crew struggles valiantly to save the ship and those aboard. They throw cargo over the side to lighten the ship. They are convinced of their own demise. Who is at the center to provide salvation for those aboard? The man of God. Though they are vastly different, the man of God is central to the salvation of the crew.

With Jonah, it's he that is the problem. He tells the crew, they don't listen. They are determined to save him. When it's clear the hope is lost they finally listen and throw Jonah in the drink which calms the storm. With Paul, the storm doesn't

magically calm at his command, but he is nevertheless the key to their salvation. It is he that is in God's favor and has protection on the passage. It is he to whom the promise of God is made that no one will perish. It is he who maintains his composure while chaos reigns around him. Paul is at the center of how this group will make it alive, and it becomes clear that their fates are tied to their proximity to Paul.

Paul speaks up again. The men are desperate. He reminds them of his earlier warning not so much as an "I told you so" but more likely as a means of trying to get their attention and let them know he has some wisdom in what is transpiring. Paul assures them that they will remain safe. The ship will be lost, but none of the passengers. To appeal to them on a spiritual front he informs them of the word that came to him through an angel, and he identifies himself in reference to his God. This would have mattered to the crew even if they didn't share Paul's faith. The heathen understood that different peoples had their own Gods. Remember in the Old Testament that the strength of one's god(s) was revealed by victory in contest or battle. Multiple deities were common.

In addition to recognizing multiple deities, there was also a common understanding that said deities would send messengers to their faithful from time to time. An angelic visit would not have been out of bounds, and Paul is citing this as his authority. He furthers his message by conveying his destiny, trial before Caesar. It's a kind of "if I make it guys, you'll make it too."

The way this is framed is different than Paul's initial warning. The initial warning was out of experience. This warning is prophetic. He is speaking on behalf of what God had told him, and he is making an ironclad prediction of how circumstances will unfold.

Finally after two weeks of terrible experiences, they sense land on the way. They drop anchor. Why? Why not just go right for the land?

Land here is both hope and terror. It is hope that they can make it off of the dangerous waters. It is terror because if they can't see where they are going or what's out there, there is serious risk that they will hit some rocks and be killed. Hope. Terror.

Hope and terror are not strangers. Riding on a plane inspires both. The hope of fast passage. The terror of "what if it goes down?" The teen whose parents say "if you are at a party and drink too much, don't get behind the wheel, call us." If that moment arrives there is the hope of getting home safely and the fear of what consequence might follow the misdeed. Even the gospel has components of hope and terror. Particularly depending on how it's delivered.

The hope is salvation and eternity in the Kingdom of God. It's forgiveness of sins and the comfort and guidance of the Holy Spirit. The terror is what awaits if we fail to embrace Christ. The stories of hell and hellfire and that the "wages of sin are death". This is too often the dominant tactic to terrorize someone to faith.

Hope. And terror.

It is my sensibility that we do much more effectively to focus more on the hope than the terror. It doesn't mean that we don't acknowledge that there are consequences to disbelief, but why worry about those if we have such a profound appreciation for the hope that we embrace it fully?

Evidently not everyone was listening to Paul about staying together. Some sailors tried to jump into a lifeboat on the sly. They were caught and Paul throws out an interesting suggestion to the soldier. "If they run off, YOU can't be saved". How does this unpack? Three suggestions for this.

There is an "all or nothing" component to this promise of rescue from the storm. Either everyone stays with Paul and the ship and are saved, or if some run off they will all be doomed.

There is a more spiritually salvific tone to the statement. A hallmark of the Christian heart is to want to see the good of all. We don't want to see people needlessly harmed, much less dead. To callously allow these men to go to their demise does not resound as a heart ready to embrace the radical, redeeming love of Christ manifested by us in radical compassion and love.

There is also a practical sensibility perhaps. If someone is about to suffer a severe consequence but it has no bearing on me, I'm less likely to lift a finger to help them. On the other hand if my fate is tied to theirs I'm much more likely to act. If they die but I'm safe that's one thing. If they die and I allowed it even though I could have prevented it, I'm dead too has a whole different ring to it.

Paul at this point is now at the center of the action. He's just pulled sailors away from their death, and now he is speaking confidently to the rest. They need food. They don't need food because it's a "last hurrah" since they're about to die. They need it for the exact opposite reason. They are going to live and the ordeal has a way to go. They need strength. So Paul instructs them to do so.

The image of Paul breaking bread is very "communion." He's not doing communion with them, that makes no sense. It's the middle of the storm and they have no reference point or shared faith. However the image is significant. If some of these on the ship later run across a community of faith and are intrigued to check them out, and they see communion being served, it may send their mind back to this moment. The brave, faithful Paul feeding them as the Lord saves them

from the sea. Who knows? Perhaps this was a seed planted towards conversion.

They chuck whatever food was left over the side to lighten the load, and finally daylight comes. As they head towards this beach, they hit a sandbar before running aground and the ship is smashed to pieces, just as Paul had said it would be. Fearing prisoners may escape, the soldiers argue that they should kill them all. This would make perfect sense. To lose a prisoner meant the guard(s) responsible would serve out the sentence on behalf of the prisoner themselves.. No one would bat an eye if they cut down prisoners to prevent escape. And imagine this commitment. Not like today where a single soldier could take out multiple prisoners fast and easy with a firearm, they would have had to run down or swim down, catch, and then kill them. What a chore!

Julius, however, has other plans. He persuades them to stay their hand specifically for Paul. Could it be because he liked Paul? Could it be because he was specifically charged to keep Paul alive? Could it be that somewhere Julius was beginning to see something inspiring in Paul and wondering more about Paul's God and faith? Could it be that Julius no knew that their safety was indeed tied directly to Paul, and to do him in was to risk their life and limb? Could it be a little of each?

We don't know, but we do know that Paul here was a compelling figure at least to Julius. Throughout the journey thus far, Paul has called out what would happen, and what needed to happen for them to be spared. We know even if the rest of them didn't that their fate was tied directly to Paul fulfilling his destiny and reaching Rome. So long as they were pulling in Paul's direction, they would be kept safe.

Paul continues to astonish with his resolve and clear and cool headedness. No matter what chaos surrounds him he is in control of himself and in turn to an extent controls the outcome of the situation. His steadfast faith and willingness to wholly put himself in the hands of God gives him strength, peace, and comfort. It also ensures his witness is one of integrity and consistency. In this instance, his faithfulness to God and God's faithfulness to him saw to it that an entire ship-load of people were saved. Would that our faith would be as steeled and steady.

Next, on to Rome!