

**Sermon**  
**23 June 2019**  
**West Kirk of Calder & Polbeth Harwood**

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Reading: Acts 27:13-26

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The Acts of the Apostles is a follow-up to the Gospel according to Luke. We know this because it's been written in the same language and style, both books have been dedicated to the same patron (as we see in the first few verses of both books), and most importantly – the story in Acts just carries on from where the one in Luke ended.

Jesus told his disciples that they should be his witnesses *in Jerusalem*, and *to the ends of the earth*. And as the stories in Acts unfold, we see this happening.

The first half of the book focuses on the role Peter played in this, and the second half focuses on Paul.

We all know Paul's life story. How he persecuted Christians as a law-abiding Jew, met the risen Jesus, and then turned his whole life around, and became a missionary like no other.

Paul did everything in his power to make sure he was doing as Jesus commanded. And if we read through all his letters in the New

Testament, we see that this was sometimes a very hard job, but no matter what his circumstances, he always persevered.

He started testifying in Jerusalem, and then began travelling all over to tell people of Jesus. His aim was to end up in Rome, because at that point in history the Romans ruled over the whole known world, and he literally wanted *everybody* to hear about Jesus.

But poor Paul didn't only get opposition from the Gentiles, he got opposition from his own people too. After lots of meetings and deliberations (as is often the case when decisions have to be made in a church), it was decided in Jerusalem that Gentiles didn't have to convert to Judaism if they became Christians.

But now the law-abiding Jews accused Paul of telling the Jewish Christians that they didn't have to adhere to all the Jewish laws anymore either. This wasn't exactly true – but to make a long story short – Paul ended up as a prisoner.

If there was one thing the Roman authorities couldn't stand, it was public uproar. So Paul was sent to appear before the authorities in Rome. By boat.

This journey would have taken around 60 days.

I don't know how all of you enjoy a journey on a boat, but ever since I was a wee girl I have had severe travel sickness. And even just reading this story of Paul in the storm on the boat makes me feel queasy!

I know I've told this story to quite a lot of you before, but I can't talk about a journey on sea without thinking about this: I once had to conduct a wedding on a boat. The only reason I said yes, was because the groom was my best friend's brother... So at the wedding rehearsal I said that I was nervous about going out on the sea in the boat, because what if I feel sick when I am supposed to conduct this ceremony?

To which the groom's dad very sincerely said: "I have some good advice for you Nanda. Just eat a big spoonful of strawberry jam before you get on the boat." "Oh", I said, "I've never heard of that remedy before?" To which he replied: "It won't make you feel any better, but then at least, when you are sick, it won't taste as bad!"

Paul wanted to go to Rome. I'm sure the journey he had in mind was not one as a prisoner on a ship – but talk about silver linings! He was on his way to the place he's always wanted to go to, and now the government was even funding his travel expenses!

God works in mysterious ways...

The crew spent more time in Crete than they planned on, and Paul warned them that it was too dangerous to sail now, because winter has started, and in those days, with the boats they had, they never sailed during the winter, because of the severe storms that could break out while at sea.

But they didn't take him seriously, because what would he know? And the captain decided that they would sail to Phoenix and spend the winter there.

The best way I can relate this to life in Scotland, is to compare it with hanging out washing. I find it so funny that people here can get so excited about hanging out their washing when the sun is out. It's obviously because this doesn't happen often!! But no sensible person will hang their washing out if they see the dark clouds drifting closer – because those clouds are a sure sign of the rain coming!

Just like that, in Paul's time, they knew that in wintertime the storms would come.

But... There was a gentle south wind blowing, so the captain thought it was the perfect conditions for sailing. He basically ignored the warning signs.

Before long, as he should have known, everything changed. A wind as strong as a hurricane came! They tried as best they could to keep steering the boat, but eventually gave up and realised that the best thing they could do was to give way to the wind and just be driven along with it.

They took a huge battering. Lots of things were thrown overboard to make the ship lighter. We read that “when neither sun nor stars appeared for many days and the storm continued raging”, they finally gave up all hope of being saved.

So at this point, it was *literally* dark around them, but *metaphorically* even darker, because they couldn't see the light, and they were losing hope.

But then Paul stood up and spoke to them. He said: “An angel of the God whose I am and whom I serve appeared to me and said to not be afraid.” God wanted Paul to stand trial before Caesar, and therefore God would graciously save the lives of all those on board with him too.

And God did. For a whole two weeks they were being driven across the sea – it must have felt like a lifetime, but at last, land was in sight. The ship struck a sand bar and started to fall apart completely, but everybody on board grabbed hold of something and reached the beach safely. The island they arrived at were called Malta.

Paul eventually reached Rome, and as far as he went, he told people about God. Not even the worst circumstances imaginable could put him off...

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I think this is such a meaningful story! Although this horrifying experience really happened to Paul, there are lots of metaphors in this story that we can relate to our lives.

So while we are talking about metaphors, let me ask you this: if you could compare your live with a boat, where are you finding yourself at the moment:

- Sailing off into the sunset on quiet waters, in tranquil surroundings, just living the dream?
- Or does your life feel like a holiday on a cruise liner, enjoying the better things in life, spending time with lots of people and discovering new places and things as far as you go?

- Or do you feel as if you don't belong? Like a wee fishing boat on dry land? Wondering how you ended up where you are?
- Or do you feel like an old battered ship in a heavy storm on the sea, praying to see light and land as soon as possible?
- Or do you feel as if it's too late to salvage anything of your life, as if you are sinking and there's nothing you can do about it??

We might all be in completely different places today, facing different circumstances, going through different things... But you know what? The one thing that never changes, no matter what kind of boat you find yourself in today, is the presence of God.

God is there in the good times, but he is also there when we feel as if we are drowning.

It doesn't mean that because you can't see the light, it's not there. It's just behind the dark clouds – and the amazing thing about life is that no storm lasts forever.

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So what can we learn from Paul?

It doesn't mean that because he gave his whole life to God, God made everything go smoothly for him... God didn't make everything perfect in his life, God didn't give Paul a life of leisure, luxury and comfort. Instead, God gave him something that was even better: a life of purpose, mission and impact. And Paul embraced it. He made the most of it. He loved it.

But sometimes, when things got just a little too much for him, he just waited it out.

Like when the storm was so severe that they decided to just drift along and go where the winds took them. If at that point they would try to steer the ship in the direction they would have preferred to go, the winds would have damaged the ship beyond repair.

So they did the sensible thing and just waited it out.

And that is what we should do too. When we find ourselves in a good place, we should enjoy every minute, and thank God for it; but if we find ourselves in a bad place, there sometimes really just is nothing we can do about it.

So then, we should just allow life to take us along to wherever it's heading with us, sit tight, and wait it out. Because eventually we will end up somewhere. And not even for a minute we will be alone.

Sometimes, we just have to LET GO AND LET GOD.

There is a time to *do things* and a time to *wait*. We can't always control what happens to us, but if we just remember that God is on his way with us somewhere, that being a believer doesn't mean that you'll have a life of leisure, but that you'll have a life of purpose, we'll be able to get through the storms of life in one piece.

So let's try to learn from Paul – let's always praise God, if even when things are not going our way. Let's always set an example of what it

means to belong to God, even if it's very difficult. And if the storms of life batter our lives to pieces, let's keep our eyes open for that piece of driftwood we can hold on to to get us to dry land.

Because no matter what happens to us, we are NEVER alone.

If you have run out of options to steer your life in the direction you would like it to go – just let go and let God take care of you. And before you know it, you'll have a story to share – a story about God's care and provision in troubled times.

And then, when you tell others about what you've been through, you will be doing exactly what God asked you to do. Just like Paul did.

Don't try to be the captain of your own ship. Because we have no idea when and where a storm is going to break out... Allow God to steer your life in the direction he wants to take it, because he knows what he is doing.

Amen