

# In the Eye of the Storm

Doon, July 13, 2025 © Scott McAndless – Fifth Sunday after Pentecost  
Acts 27:13-14, 18-38, Psalm 25:1-10, Colossians 1:1-14, Luke 10:25-37

**T**he sailors have been fighting a ceaseless battle against the wind and the waves for two full weeks. Caught in a storm of change, they have been unable to escape the power of its winds that have driven them at an unrelenting pace. And the crisis that the church is facing is so dire that they have worked themselves into utter exhaustion. They have not even been able to eat properly, and the lack of sustenance has caused them to become mean and irritable with one another.

They have also been making hard choices. They have had to do whatever they can just to keep the church afloat. They've already had to sacrifice the ship's tackle and gear, those items that are supposed to be used to give the ship purpose and direction. They have had to throw these things overboard, sacrificing it all just in order to gain a little bit more buoyancy so that the ship does not go under.

And, after fourteen days of this, of course they are all feeling discouraged and fearful for the survival of their "boat." They may just feel ready to give up altogether. That is where we find ourselves in our reading this morning from the Book of Acts.

## Heavy-Handed Metaphor

And I know I what you're thinking. "Okay, Scott, we get it. You don't need to hit us over the head with such a heavy-handed metaphor. The ship is a traditional symbol of the church. The storm represents the tumultuous times of change that we are living through. The tackle thrown overboard is our vision which gets dumped when we're afraid for our survival. And we are the poor overworked sailors who are getting irritable because we are spiritually malnourished. We get it! But do you really have to read our specific situation into every story you find in the Bible?"

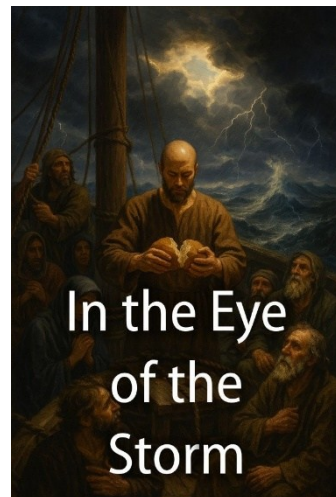
Ah, but you don't understand me. It is not me who is putting the struggles we are facing into this story, I am convinced that the author of this passage has given us no choice but to take this story and apply it directly to the life of the church, and that is because of what happens on the fourteenth day.

## The Eye of the Storm

On the fourteenth day of the storm, there is a sudden break in the weather. The storm clouds have not disappeared. They still surround them on every horizon, dark and menacing. But, for a few moments the sky directly overhead clears, the winds slack off a bit and people get a few moments to breathe.

It makes me wonder whether they may have actually been caught in a hurricane and have just come into the eye of the storm which may seem like a place of safety. But any experienced sailor knows that it is not. But whatever has caused this, it is a moment of much-needed calm.

And during this calm, something extraordinary happens. A man steps forward. As he stands before them, one pure ray of sunlight breaks through the clouds and falls directly on his bald head. The entire crew looks toward him in surprise and wonder. And he speaks to them words of comfort and encouragement – words of life when all that surrounds them is death.



## Shipboard Communion?

And then he takes a loaf of bread and, giving thanks to God, he lifts it up and breaks it before them. And he eats a mouthful as they watch. And then, one by one, the sailors and the passengers on the boat come forward and take a piece of bread and eat and find comfort and strength.

Oh come on! Are you trying to tell me that we are not supposed to recognize what just happened as a church service? We just had a sermon and communion! At the time that this Book of Acts was written, the earliest rituals of worship and communion were already established. The first readers would have immediately recognized it and so should we.

And so, there is no question in my mind that the writer of the Book of Acts (traditionally called Luke) intentionally told this story in order to say something about the challenges facing the church in his own day. And if it spoke to the challenges that the early church faced, it surely speaks to the challenges that we face.

## Our Present Storm

It is not hard to compare the situation of the church today to a storm. The winds of change that are whipping around all of our churches are many and they are blowing strong. There are societal shifts and demographic shifts. We are facing a crisis in clergy leadership – both in terms of finding them and in terms of paying them. And I'm sure we could go on.

Let's be clear here – this is not new. The church has been in the storm many times before in its long history. As I say, the author of the Acts presents this story as being about the church in his day, but it has happened again and again.

Every storm is different, and each brings its unique challenges, but the messages and the promises that speak to Paul's storm continue to speak to the church just as clearly as we face our contemporary storm.

## Not a Boat Full of Christians

So, what are the messages to the church that we need to pay attention to in this story today? I'm going to start with the one that people might want to point to to say that this story is not actually about the church. There is the simple fact that the boat in this story is actually not full of Christians.

Paul is on this ship because he is a prisoner who is being transferred to Rome. It is never explicitly said, but it does seem like he has a few companions with him. One of them is even telling the story using the first-person plural – “we” did this and this happened to “us.” But there is no explanation for why Paul would have been allowed to bring friends with him and it really doesn't make much sense that he would have.

But clearly, even if there are a few Christians, everyone else on the ship is a pagan. There are soldiers, other prisoners, sailors and other people who have bought passage. So, when everyone gathers on the deck of the ship in the eye of the storm, this can't be a church gathering, can it?

## For Whom the Church Exists

Well, of course it can! This is one of the most powerful misconceptions that we have about the church. We assume that the church exists for the sake of Christians. But it doesn't. The church exists for the sake of those who are not part of it, or, at the very least, for those who are not yet part of it.

And as Paul took that loaf of bread and broke it, he did not do it only to feed his companions. He knew that their small presence on the ship would mean nothing unless it also brought strength and hope and meaning to the lives of everyone on board.

Paul and his few companions are therefore a metaphor for how a small church can have a big impact on the whole society. And that continues to be the mission of the church to the whole world, even if we are in the midst of a storm.

## Paul's Leadership

Another odd thing about this whole story is the important role that Paul plays. He is only a prisoner and should have no status on the ship. And yet again and again throughout this story we see him taking on a leadership role. He gives opinions about when and where to sail. He tells the captain and the centurion what to do at various points. And, of course, he even gathers the entire ship's compliment to address them.

This all makes little sense from an historical perspective, of course. Why would a prisoner be given any sort of status in that situation. But again, I think there is a message in that for us in the church today.

## Finding Relevance Today

There was a time – and many of us remember it – when the church was given automatic respect and deference in our society. But today – thanks to numerous church scandals in most denominations and the spiritual diversity of society – we no longer get that. And we often conclude, because of that, that we are now irrelevant and can have no impact on society.

But Paul's importance on that ship – despite having no status or position – is a message for the church today. If we, like Paul, can dare to stand up and speak in words of hope and purpose into situations where people are lost and despairing, we will earn that relevance and voice that is no longer given to us automatically.

## Irrational Sailors

During the storm, there is an odd incident where Paul particularly steps up in leadership. **“The sailors tried to escape from the ship and had lowered the boat into the sea on the pretext of putting out anchors from the bow,”** it says.

And this, many readers have noticed, really makes no sense at all. The sailors are not acting rationally. If the bigger ship is in danger of sinking or capsizing in the storm, there is absolutely no way that even the most experienced sailor is going to survive in a rowboat.

## Importance of Working Together

It makes no sense therefore that the sailors would have done that, but that is exactly the kind of nonsensical thinking that we fall into far too easily in the church these days. As soon as the waters get rough, we start to think only about our own little lifeboat. We huddle in together and concentrate on bailing. We even make the ridiculous assumption that, if we just let all the other lifeboats go down, ours will become miraculously more buoyant.

But it just doesn't work like that when you're caught in the storm. As Paul insists, **“Unless these men stay in the ship, you cannot be saved.”** If we stay isolated in our own lifeboats, the storm will overtake us. But Paul speaks to offer us hope. If we all work together, we will be able to thrive.

## I Told You So

There is one particular thing that we need to understand about the hope that Paul offers to us today, though. He is very specific about it. At another point, he addresses the ship's company to explain exactly what God is committed to preserve.

**"Men,"** he proclaims, **"you should have listened to me and not have set sail from Crete and thereby avoided this damage and loss."** Yes, Paul actually got up and said, "I hate to say I told you so, but I told you so." And we usually say things like that to make ourselves feel good and to put other people down.

## No Loss of Life

But Paul actually says this for very different reason. He is about to give them good and hopeful news. **"I urge you now to keep up your courage, for there will be no loss of life among you."** But he also wants them to understand that this salvation is not because they have done the right thing. They have made the wrong decision again and again. But he is telling them that God will save them anyway.

And God will save us. We may make the wrong decisions in our churches. We may foolishly act in self-centred and self-serving ways. We may let our pride or fear guide us rather than our trust and our faith. But God is faithful. God is committed to you and you and you as believers and will not fail you. God is committed to us as the church, the body of Christ. God will save you and not just in the next life but in this one.

## But Only of the Ship

But – and yes, Paul adds a *but*. **"There will be no loss of life among you,"** he continues, **"but only of the ship."** And I will leave it to you to reflect on what the ship represents in our present context. As the story continues, what Paul predicts comes true as various parts of the ship – the tackle and ropes, the lifeboats, its precious cargo of grain – are jettisoned one by one. Finally, the ship itself is broken apart when it runs aground at Malta.

What might we have to jettison in the present storm – what traditions, independence, how many "we've always done it that ways" will have to go overboard? I don't know. But we will have to remain open to all of that. And will some or even all of our physical structures be broken up on the reefs of the Island of Malta? I cannot say.

All of what may come may be traumatic, but do not doubt for one minute God's promises to you – both to you individually, but also to you as the church, the gathered people of God. If you trust in midst of the storm, not one of you will perish.

## An Invitation to Hope

Once all those pagans on that ship had eaten the broken bread with Paul, they found the courage to hope and to do what needed to be done. **"After they had satisfied their hunger, they lightened the ship by throwing the wheat into the sea."**

And so, I invite you now. I found this bread in the hold of the ship downstairs this morning. The storm has been raging, and you have been in suspense and lacking sufficient spiritual nourishment for some time now. Therefore, I urge you to take some food, for it will help you survive, for none of you will lose a hair from your heads. Thanks be to God who will always provide what we need most.