

Acts 27:13-25

"Sailing on Stormy Seas: Hope"

We have spent the summer as a congregation walking through the book of Acts in order to discern what it means to "be the church". Since an Interim period is the time to celebrate what is good and make changes when necessary, I thought this would be a good way to take a look at our church family and at God's expectations and to assess how the two compare. We have looked at sharing, setting priorities, listening to God's call, the need for empathy, the importance of prayer, our call to be witnesses for Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit in our midst. All of these elements are necessary in a church for God to be able to use us effectively for the work of his kingdom.

Of course, we have looked at all of this through the lens of the disciples' work in the post-resurrection era of the early church. And I hope you have seen, as I have, that the journey that the early church was on is not so different from the one that we take today. Now, since we have just completed a wonderful time of fellowship, learning, singing, sharing and creativity in our Vacation Bible School "Deep Sea Discovery", I felt really called to try to tie Bible School and our clarification of what it means to be the church together. So how fitting that Paul's last journey recorded in Acts finds him on the high seas on his way to Rome. But his "Deep Sea Discovery" and ours are vastly different.

You see, Paul is on a ship because he is being taken to Rome as a prisoner. During one particular leg of the voyage, Paul actually tried to warn the centurions that were in charge of his transport that they were headed for some rough seas and should sit tight for a while. But of

course, no one listened to him and they ended up in the middle of a terrible storm. It was actually described in the Bible as a "northeaster".

Many years ago, I was on a sailboat with my husband and some cousins on Lake Erie when a completely unpredicted noreaster, as they call them in Ohio, swept over the lake. It was terrifying! The rain was torrential but the wind was worse than anything I have ever experienced. These particular cousins are Catholic and when the sails became parallel with the water, I decided to go to the bottom of the boat and make the sign of the cross with them. Figured it couldn't hurt.

Paul's sailing trip and mine on Lake Erie sound very similar. At one point, the storm was raging so terribly for Paul that they began to throw cargo – food and other supplies, overboard to lighten the load. And of course, in Paul's day, they had no GPS system like we do in modern ships. So after a few days in the storm, not having seen the moon or stars for many nights, the sailors had no idea where they were. At this point, some of the soldiers even wanted to pitch the prisoners overboard to increase their own odds of survival. But they knew that any soldier who lost a prisoner would be executed so that would have been an even worse choice. In other words, the people on the ship were desperate. Fear was running high and hope was running low.

And friends, how many of us have not faced such a storm? Everyone in this sanctuary has dealt with illness, the death of a loved one, broken relationships, or the consequences of actions – our or someone else's. Everyone here has most likely at one time or another had to wonder if the paycheck would last until the next one, if they our kids would finish college before the money ran out, or if we have saved enough for our retirement to last as long as we do.

This week in the adult class of Bible School, we made a list on the board one night of our fears. The answers ran the gamut from dementia to the elections. And this took me back just a

few weeks ago to my vacation. We had a glorious, if unusually hot week on the Isle of Palms with our two children, their spouses and our two and a half year old grandson. I slept late, played hard, ate well and enjoyed my family. I did not take this time for granted as I know that there are many people who do not have the time, the resources, the relationships or the desire to spend a week this way.

But I also spent a lot of time listening to the four young adults in our lives – all age 25 – 35. These young folks were blessed to be raised in church – all four cradle Presbyterians I might add. They are good citizens, gainfully employed, caring young people. They vote. They are patriotic. They believe in family. And yet, the thoughts they shared with my husband and I and with each other were filled with fear.

We happened to be at the beach when the shootings took place in Baton Rouge and Minnesota and then the riot erupted in Dallas. I listened carefully as they processed these events. And I learned that they do not have faith in our government. They do not trust the political systems. They do not believe what they hear on the media. They want to make a difference in this world but are not sure it will matter. And I will have to say that all of this shows a reasonable amount of intelligence. But sadly, what I really heard were their feelings of hopelessness about today's world.

When my pregnant daughter talked about how scary it is to bring a child into the world today, I wished they were two again and I could cuddle with them and promise to protect them from the scary monsters that live under the bed. And I too felt hopeless, just for an instant.

Then I began to think about how different life is for those of us who are Christians. Because while we DO live in a world that seems filled with hopeless situations, as followers of the risen Christ we are NEVER REALLY without hope. According to the dictionary, hope is a

belief in a positive outcome related to events and circumstances in one's life. Hope is a feeling that what is wanted can be had or that events will turn out for the best.

A story is told about a family that had two sons. One was an eternal optimist and the other an incorrigible pessimist. The parents decided to try to correct their sons at Christmas. So they planned to give the pessimistic child everything that he could possibly dream of in hopes that he would start to see that good things in life could come his way. On the other hand, they decided to give the optimistic child nothing but a bag of horse manure.

On Christmas day, the first child opened a wonderful electric train but his response was, "It will probably just break!" Next he opened up a brand new iPhone and said, "I don't have any money to load new games." On and on it went. Then the enthusiastic child opened his gift. He began to jump up and down and shout with joy. His parents were so confused and asked, "Don't you see what is in the bag?" "Yes," he shouted. "It's horse manure. So there must be a pony around here somewhere!" Now THAT is a hopeful young boy!

But of course, that is not the kind of hope I am talking about. I am speaking of CHRISTIAN hope, which is one of the strongholds of our faith. So, using the definition that I just read, CHRISTIAN HOPE is a belief in a positive outcome related to events and circumstances in the life of Jesus Christ. And these circumstances give us a hope that restores our expectations, our energy and gives us a purpose in our lives.

This is the hope that gave Paul the stamina to withstand the storm, to take charge of those who had imprisoned him and to offer that hope to others. Paul knew that God had a plan for him to go to Rome so he absolutely believed that God would get him there. He knew from his own faith and the faith of those who had gone before him that God only makes promises that God can keep.

Honestly, I think every generation has at one time felt like my children do, like I do sometimes, and like the men on Paul's boat did. Nothing could be worse than this. We have all had our battles to fight, our demons to conquer, our circumstances to overcome. Paul relied on the hope that lived in his heart because he knew that God keeps his promises. These promises had enabled Jesus to conquer death, had completely transformed Paul's life in every way, and had equipped him to spread the gospel throughout his world, despite terrible odds.

Hope helps us keep sight of our goals. I read the story this week about Florence Chadwick the first women to swim the English Channel both ways. She didn't quite make it on her first attempt. Oddly enough, it wasn't the cold water or the sharks or the fifteen hours of swimming that caused her to fall short. It was the fog.

You see, a fog rolled in and she couldn't see the coastline and so she quit a half mile from the shore. When she got out of the water she said, "I'm not trying to make an excuse but I feel like if the fog hadn't been there and I could have seen land, I would have made it." Later she tried again and the fog rolled in again. But this time, she kept swimming because she knew the coastline was there. She not only completed the journey, but did it in two fewer hours than anyone else ever had. Hope helped her reclaim her vision for the future. The same hope that Paul had when he began to preach to the Gentiles at God's command.

Hope also encourages. God sent an angel in the midst of the storm to encourage Paul. "Do not be afraid," the angel said. "You must stand before the emperor and so God will grant safety to all who sail with you." Paul did not keep this hope to himself but encouraged others with the promise. Even those who were his known enemies at the time. And if we are to be the church in a world that is filled with hopelessness, we TOO must share the hope that have with each other, our church family and the world.

So here is some of the hope we have to cling to. This church community has been alive for over 250 years. Ministers have come and gone. So have people. The denomination has changed and will change again. We will agree and disagree and agree to disagree in love. Yet the body of Christ at Nazareth remains and will continue to do so. Because we have hope.

We have hope because this week in Vacation Bible School, each night *more* people came instead of less. We have hope because we heard the enthusiasm in the children's singing. We know this because the Youth, the future of this church, recently shared their faith that was deepened from their Montreat trip. We have hopes because we witnessed the love that was shown to two women in our church who lost siblings this week. Our shared encouragement, however small it may seem, can strengthen others at just the right time and enable us to encourage others in the world.

But above all else, Paul also has the hope of eternal life. And so do we. Friends, Christian hope is confident expectation based on the promises made to us and fulfilled in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Because this is what gives us the hope of a better life, a life where all is healed and whole, where death, age, and suffering are no more. A life without violence and war and hunger and oppression and even campaign commercials! Where all of humankind REALLY IS EQUAL and each of us here are seen only as children created in God's image. This hope in something better is what carried Paul and other followers of Christ to stand the course and it is the same hope that we are called to rely on and share if we are to "be the church".

Friday our daughter Katie and Grandson Hayden stopped by for a visit. As I mentioned earlier he is 2 ½. Somehow or another, conversation turned to their dog, Tucker. I guess

Hayden is feeling rather territorial, knowing that his little brother is coming in less than a month, and he said, "You had ME before you had Tucker."

My daughter replied, "Actually I got Tucker first. I have had him for 5 years and 5 years ago, you were still with God." In a flash, Hayden said, "God was really nice to me." When I heard this, I knew that my daughter DOES have hope. Like Paul's companions during their hazardous voyage and like all of us when we see the violence and racial tensions that seem prevalent in our nation right now, she temporarily lost sight of it when the news was so terrifying while we were on vacation.

But like Paul, she has a faith in something greater. She has already taught it to her son, who passed it on to me. And God calls us all to do in our efforts to "be the church", I will pass that hope on. And I pray you will too. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.