

Faith In The Storm

Two weeks ago I shared a message about Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego and called it Faith In The Furnace. This morning I want to talk about some people caught at sea in a terrible storm. I've called this Faith In The Storm.

You've no doubt heard the report of the cargo vessel El Faro that was lost at sea just a few days ago in hurricane Joaquin. A tragic loss of life. Some of you have been caught in your own version of a hurricane, a storm has come your way that is threatening to overwhelm you, to take you down. I want to help you find faith to keep going even in the midst of a storm!

Most of you are aware we know a little something about storms around here. In May of 1999 this facility was hit by a tornado that did \$4 million dollars worth of damage and left us in a borrowed facility for 20 months. No lives were lost here, thank the Lord, but we know something about storms. We know about not having enough money and being homeless with no place to meet and believing God to supply what we needed – and he did! The truth is, that storm, that event, proved to be a pivotal time in the history of our church. It moved us beyond where we had been and beyond where I thought we were going or where I thought we could go. It served to redefine our focus, our identity. It stretched what was at that time a 66 year old church. It brought us to dependence upon God in a way that some of us had never experienced before.

Some of you have been going through difficult storms in your life and I felt the Lord reminding me of some lessons learned in the storm, lessons we must not forget. Some of you are going through life changing storms. That night in May of 1999 as Darryl Wootton and I walked through what was left of this facility, we knew a storm had just blown our ship way off the course we had been on. God was taking us somewhere way off my map but not off of His map. I thought we were on a heaven bound cruise ship sailing safely, without risk, just eating at the spiritual buffet, listening to gospel music and having a good time. Jesus knew we had been saved for a greater purpose than that. This wasn't about entertaining the passengers, this was a search and rescue vessel that was supposed to journey through stormy seas in order to find the lost and dying. Perhaps we had gotten too comfortable but a storm managed to blow us off of our course and onto his. He took us off the charted map to show us his way.

If you are going through a storm that is producing change in your life, don't panic. Don't worry. Trust him and go where he is taking you. Remember this: wherever he is taking you, even though you've never been there before - God is already there!

Turn to Acts 27 and I want to show you some lessons learned in a storm. While you are finding Acts 27, let me give you some background as to what is happening in this story. Paul in the earlier chapters of the book of Acts was known as Saul. He had been a leader in hunting down and arresting Jews who were converting to this new faith called Christianity. In the midst of his persecution, Saul has an encounter with the risen Christ and is himself born again. He becomes a Christian and a leader and changes his name to Paul. He begins to preach to Jews and Gentiles alike telling them about Jesus, the Messiah and Savior. After years away from Jerusalem, Paul comes back and meets the leaders of the church there. They warn him that some of the Jews in Jerusalem haven't forgotten him. They still view him as a traitor of sorts, having converted to Christianity. He goes to the temple and is recognized and then the people begin to falsely accuse him of bringing Gentiles into the temple area. A riot starts and they try to kill Paul so the Roman soldiers intervene to stop the riot. They arrest Paul, figuring he must be the cause of all the trouble. Through a lengthy ordeal and imprisonment Paul finally appeals to Caesar and as a Roman citizen, he has a right to be tried before the Emperor so they order him sent to Rome. Our story begins as Paul sails for Rome in Acts 27. Luke was the traveling companion to Paul and he is telling the story. It had been a rough journey already as they sailed north along the coastline. They had to take refuge in a place called Fair Havens on the island of Crete. It was late October and the weather made sea travel very dangerous. Paul warned them to winter there but likely the greed of the owner caused them to push on in spite of the danger.

“When a gentle south wind began to blow, they thought they had obtained what they wanted; so they weighed anchor and sailed along the shore of Crete. Before very long, a wind of hurricane force, called the ‘northeaster’ swept down from the island. The ship was caught by the storm and could not head into the wind; so we gave way to it and were driven along.” Acts 27:13-15

Notice that phrase: “they thought they had obtained what they wanted.” There’s a warning for us. **We focus on what we want, God focuses on what we need.** We think “If I just had this ... if I could just have more money, if I could just have that job, if I could just have that person”, but God knows what we need! Some of our wants are going to lead us right into a hurricane! Some of what we desire will take us some place we really don’t want to go! That gentle south wind starts blowing and we think “that’s just what I wanted,” but that gentle wind can be deceptive. You better be asking “Lord what do I need? What’s best for me?” Consider

this:

Storms can become check points for priorities. When that gentle south wind came along, they thought they had what they wanted because what they wanted was to deliver their cargo as quickly as they could. The pilot and owner were willing to risk the lives of the crew and passengers because their priority was money. They were looking at the bottom line rather than looking at the big picture, but by the time the storm hit, the pilot and owner were probably re-thinking their decision. Of course, it was a bit late by then. Storms have a way of clarifying our priorities. You think you know what's important until a storm comes along and then you start learning there are a lot of things you can live without. You learn what's really important. You discover those things you can't live without. We got rid of a lot of things in May of 99 when the tornado came through. Some stuff we never replaced because we found out it just wasn't that important. Some things we think are essential become unnecessary in a storm. Look at this:

“We took such a violent battering from the storm that the next day they began to throw the cargo overboard.” Acts 27:18. They went from “let's get this ship sailing so we can deliver this cargo and make some money” to “forget the cargo, throw it overboard and lighten the load or we'll all die!” Priorities change in a storm! Life is more important than things.

Your priorities may have been about money and success until a storm hit and you realize you can't enjoy the money if you're dead. Your priorities may have led you to risk it all and head into a storm and now you've lost your marriage, your family, your reputation, you've lost your way in the storm. It's time for you to change priorities. It's time for you to jettison some cargo and baggage from your life. Get rid of stuff God says doesn't belong in your life. This storm is an opportunity for you to get your priorities right, to lighten the load, to make amends.

Notice just how desperate the circumstances were. Luke tells us, **“When neither sun nor stars appeared for many days and the storm continued raging, we finally gave up all hope of being saved.” Acts 27:20** Luke thought this was the end. This is how they were going to die. They had run out of options, out of ideas, and out of hope. The sailors on board the ship had done everything they knew to do. Thrown cargo and equipment overboard. Lowered sea anchors. They had even passed ropes underneath the ship to attempt to hold it together. They did everything they had been trained to do but finally even these veteran seamen gave up hope of

being saved.

Some of you can identify with your shipmates here. No sun or stars for days. That didn't just mean the sky was darkened by the storm. Because they used the sun and stars to chart their course, Luke was telling us they didn't know where they were or where they were headed. No wonder it seemed hopeless.

One of the things about storms: they are beyond our control. There is nothing we can do to stop them from coming. They remind us how helpless we are, how needy we are. We can't rely on our strength or ability because we are no match for a hurricane. Storms bring us face to face with the reality that we need to depend on the One that is bigger and greater than the storm.

It's at this point, when it seems hopeless, that Paul steps up in the midst of this hurricane, shouting above the wind and tells them, **“Last night an angel of the God whose I am and whom I serve stood beside me and said, ‘Do not be afraid, Paul. You must stand trial before Caesar; and God has graciously given you the lives of all who sail with you.’ So keep up your courage men, for I have faith in God that it will happen just as he told me.”**
Acts 27:23-25

In the midst of this hurricane when it was so desperate that everyone had given up hope, when they didn't know where they were or where they were headed, when they had tried everything they knew to do, when things were at their absolute worst, Paul has an encounter with God in the storm! You need to hear it this morning. It's going to be okay. **God is with you in the storm!**

Just when you think everything is hopeless, the angel of the Lord shows up. Notice Paul speaks of God as the One “whose I am and whom I serve.” Paul may have given up hope of being saved alive off of this ship, but he hadn't abandoned his hope in God. He hadn't stopped serving God or obeying God because of a storm. He knew God still loved him and that he still belonged to the Lord. (“Whose I am and whom I serve.”) The storm didn't change his relationship or his perspective. Paul just figured God's plan for him might have changed. Maybe God decided to take him to heaven instead of taking him to Rome, but either way, Paul was still going to serve God, regardless of the severity of the storm.

Listen to me. Don't let storms separate you from God. Instead, let them drive you closer to him. Let the storm drive you right into his arms with greater surrender, greater trust, greater dependence. “God, I don't know if you've changed plans for me, if you are changing the course

of my life, but I trust you. You are the God whose I am and whom I serve!” I believe if you do that, you can expect to encounter God and his purposes sooner or later in the storm.

Stop struggling and surrender to God! These sailors and everyone on board the ship had struggled and worked in their own strength and resources trying to save themselves and the ship but to no avail. Finally, the bible says, **“The ship was caught by the storm and could not head into the wind; so we gave way to it and were driven along.” Acts 27:15.** Again in verse 17 Luke tells us “they lowered the sea anchor and let the ship be driven along.” Some of us have been fighting against God’s plan and purpose, resistant to his will. It’s time to surrender, to give way to it and let him take you where he wants you to go. You won’t regret it. Stop struggling against God and surrender. The songwriter said, “Give up and let Jesus take over and he’ll make a way somehow.”

In verse 30 the sailors on board decided to try to lower the lifeboat and sneak off the ship. Paul told the Roman soldier in charge of his guard detail that if those sailors left the ship they might all die so the soldiers cut the ropes that held the lifeboat and let it fall away. Now there was no lifeboat left. No way to escape, no plan B or C. It was stay on board and trust God. Period!

That’s not a bad place to be. No options but Jesus. No plan but God’s plan. It’s a great assurance to know **The best place you can be in a storm is right where God tells you to be.** Paul told them, “We are going to run aground on some island, but God said not one of us will even lose a single hair from our head. Don’t be afraid. Trust God in the storm!” Get where God wants you to be and tells you to be and stay there, trusting God!

The ship ran aground and the stern was broken to pieces, but all 276 people on board survived as the angel had said. They find themselves on the island of Malta. This wasn’t their destination. It wasn’t part of their plan, but they discovered what we need to know as well: **Storms can be a means of taking us where we’ve never been in order to do what we’ve never done.** Don’t be afraid of the storm. Even though the storm may take you where you’ve never been, God is already there! He has it all worked out. God has a plan and you’re in it!

“But I’m afraid to trust Him. I was in the will of God, trying to be obedient, and then he let this storm come into my life. I can never trust Him again. Why would he do this to me if he loved me?” Perhaps the issue isn’t about love, it’s about service. Maybe the storm came because God needed to get you to your own version of Malta, the island where Paul and his

shipmates landed. You were headed to Rome but God needed you on Malta for a season.

Acts 28:8-10 tells us there were sick folks on Malta that needed healing, including the father of the chief official of the island. They didn't know Jesus and they had been calling on their gods to heal them. There was work to be done and God needed someone on Malta.

God wanted to get you beyond your destination, beyond your plans and your agenda. God had something else in store, something greater, something different, something beyond so he allowed a storm to blow you off your course and on to His.

He may have allowed Paul to be blown off course because he cared about Paul and he cared about the people on Malta. They needed to hear the gospel. Maybe God took you off your course because he cared about the people where you work, where you go to school, where you live. He cared about the people in that machine shop, in that retail store, in that new school classroom. He cared about them so he took you off of the course you planned for yourself and blew you onto his course. He trusted you to make a difference both on the journey and where you landed. He trusted you to make a difference wherever he took you, like Paul did. He was counting on the fact that regardless of the circumstances you would still be able to say he was the God you belonged to and the God whom you served. He was counting on you to bring hope and healing wherever you landed!

Once last thing: Maybe God let you get blown off course so you could confront and conquer the limitations of your own past. Perhaps that happened to Paul on Malta when he was bitten by a viper. The people on the island said, "This man must be a murderer. His past has caught up with him." Sure enough, as a persecutor of the church, Paul had been there when Stephen was killed as the first Christian martyr. He had thrown others into jail and was perhaps responsible for the death of other Christians. I wonder if he was free of the judgment and condemnation of the past in his own mind? Perhaps he heard the enemy saying, "See, even the pagans on this island know what you are and what you used to be."

Verse 5 says he shook the snake off into the fire. Maybe Paul shook the old voices of condemnation off into the fire as well. This experience on the island and in the storm may have assured Paul that the past was truly past. Perhaps God is taking you to a new place to liberate you from your past. Giving you an opportunity to shake some things off into the fire so you can be free to go to the next place.

Paul didn't stay in Malta. Just like he didn't stay in the storm on that ship. It was part of

the process. Part of the journey. But wherever he was, on board the ship in a storm, on an island, or in a prison or palace in Rome, Paul remembered whose he was and whom he served.

Storms can be everything I've said they could be, but they don't have to accomplish anything more than mess you up, make you angry or resentful or even dead. It depends upon your response to the storm.

Are you in a storm right now? If so, what are you going to make out of your storm? It blew you off your course, but maybe it put you right on the course where Jesus wanted you to be. Stop struggling and surrender to God and let him take you where he wants and accomplish what he wants. Check your priorities. Are you concerned with what you want or with what God says you need? What's really important? What is of eternal significance?

It's time to stop complaining about the storm and start taking advantage of the opportunity God has given you to minister on your island of Malta. Paul could have been so preoccupied with his problems he could have ignored the sick and needy on that island. "Tell them I've got problems of my own thank you. We're shipwrecked on this stinking island!"

Instead of complaining about the storm, give thanks to God for allowing that storm to blow you off of your course and onto His course. Affirm your commitment to the Lord. "God, I may never know why this storm came, but I will still declare you are the God whose I am and whom I serve."