



Courage Before the Wind

Acts 27

November 12, 2006

One Sunday I asked you how many farmers are in our congregation, because I think good farmers make good evangelists. Farmers know that you've got to plant seeds and cultivate the soil, and then you've got to wait for the miraculous action of growth. It's the same with evangelism.

Another Sunday I asked how many fishermen are in our congregation, because good fishermen make good evangelists. They know that you've got to fish where the fish, or people, are.

Today I'm curious: how many sailors are in our congregation? Good sailors make good evangelists too. Good sailors pay attention to the direction of the wind. Good evangelists pay attention to the direction of God's Holy Spirit that blows like a wind around us.

In chapter 28 of Acts we follow Paul on his last journey as he sails to Rome. We see that not only is Paul a good evangelist, but he's also a good sailor. He's already sailed all over the eastern Mediterranean on at least a dozen ships. In fact, in one of his letters, he says he's been shipwrecked three times. (2 Corinthians 11.25) He has learned how to read the wind and the weather. And knowing Paul as we do, we bet he probably couldn't stand to be still on those long journeys, but lent a hand with the sailors.

This last journey of Paul is a great sailing story. Paul, a prisoner of the Empire, is being taken by his centurion guard to Rome for trial. From Caesarea they take a shuttle boat up to Turkey, to the harbor of Myra (which, centuries later, becomes the home of the original Saint Nicholas). At Myra they get on a cargo ship loaded with grain from Egypt bound for Rome. It's the fall of the year, when the prevailing wind will be blowing out of the west against them. Their square-rigged ship, probably over a hundred feet long, cannot sail close to the wind, so the boat has to tack clumsily back and forth and back and forth. They barely make it to the island of Crete, to a harbor called Fair Havens, but not fair enough of a harbor to stay long.

There is a little conference to decide what to do. The owner of the grain cargo and the captain of the ship want to sail a little farther along the island to a better harbor where they can stay for the winter. But Paul from his own experience warns them. He predicts disaster. The centurion decides: they set sail for the next harbor. At first, a gentle south breeze carries them easily, but when they sail round one point, they are hit by a ferocious wind from the east northeast. The word in Greek here is *tuphonikos*, from which we get the word *typhoon*. Sailors had a special name for this wind: they called it

the “Euraquilo.” We would call it a nor’easter. The sailors had to take the sail down before it ripped to pieces, and let the storm drive the boat away from the coast of Crete and out to sea.

It blew them behind a small island which blocked the wind for a bit. But they all knew it would be only a temporary rest, so they scrambled to get ready for the coming onslaught. They wrapped the whole boat with great ropes like strings around a parcel package, in the hopes that it would keep their boat from breaking apart. The boat had two rudders that looked like big paddles on either side of the ship. These they lashed secure to the sides. Then they lashed the lifeboat securely to the ship too. By then they drifted past the end of the island, and the storm found them again.

I wonder if, in the middle of the storm, the captain leaned over to Paul and yelled over the wind, “We never should have left. You were right about the wind.” But probably it was too noisy to hear much of anything. They were helpless before the wind. Although it was too cloudy and dark to navigate by sun or star, they were sure that the northeast gale was driving them south toward Africa, where the sandbars of Syrtis awaited them. The Sands of Syrtis -- graveyard of the Mediterranean -- if they hit them, they were dead men. So the storm beat on them day and night and day and night with no letup. It was impossible to do anything, including to eat. But then, what is the use of eating if you’re a dead man? They abandoned all hope.

But not Paul. FOR NOT ONLY COULD PAUL PAY ATTENTION TO THE WIND IN THE AIR, PAUL ALSO PAID ATTENTION TO THE WIND OF GOD’S SPIRIT. And Paul could tell that God’s Spirit was moving. He told them to keep their courage up, “for last night an angel of my God stood by my side and promised that I will live to stand before the Emperor, and you who are with me will live too. So keep up your courage. I have confidence in my God. We’ll be stranded on some island.” (paraphrase of Acts 27:23-26)

Would they believe Paul and his God? The sailors had their doubts. That night the waters became shallower. The sandbars must be ahead! In the middle of the night, the sailors tried to save themselves and slip away in the lifeboat, but Paul discovered them and told the centurion, who ordered his men to draw their swords and cut the boat away. Now all they could do was wait together for the morning. Would they be dashed to death on the sandbars of Syrtis? Or would Paul’s God be true and save them?

At this point, Paul did a curious thing: he begged them to eat a pre-dawn breakfast, whether they felt like it or not. It was a practical request: whatever they were facing that morning, they would need strength. But then Paul turned that practical meal into a spiritual event. Before all the seventy-six souls on that ship, Paul took bread, and gave thanks to God, and then broke it in pieces for them, and began to eat. In other words, Paul shared the Lord’s Supper with them. They must have thought it would be their last breakfast ever, but Paul promised them, “not a hair will be lost from the head of

a single one of you.” (Acts 27:34) And they took something to eat, and they were all cheered.

Daylight came, and they could see a beach. So they dumped the cargo to help the lightened ship ride over the shoals. They freed the rudders, they cast off the sea anchors, they hoisted sail, and then they headed for the beach. They struck a shoal and ran aground. The waves kept coming in behind them and pounding the stern to pieces. The soldiers remembered that it was the death penalty for them if any of their prisoners escaped in the surf, so they made ready to kill them all, including Paul. But the centurion by this time had faith, if not in Paul’s God, at least in Paul, and let them all swim to the beach. And it all turned out just as Paul’s God had said: the ship would be lost, but all the souls would be saved. They landed, not on Africa, but on the island of Malta. Paul would still go to Rome, to stand before Caesar himself, and tell the gospel of Jesus the Christ.

Paul was a good sailor. He knew how to read the wind. And Paul was a good evangelist. He knew how to read the wind of the Spirit. Paul had learned to trust his life to that Holy Spirit, to let it blow Paul anywhere that Spirit willed: from the Damascus Road, to Antioch, to Asia Minor, to Greece, to Macedonia, to Jerusalem, to Caesarea, and now ultimately to Rome. In all Paul’s journeys, he had learned to have courage before the wind. If you have the courage to let the wind of God’s Spirit guide you, then no earthly storm will ever stop you.

DO YOU UNDERSTAND NOW WHY I AM TELLING YOU THIS STORY TODAY? The whole story of Paul, yes, even the whole story of the whole church in the whole Book of Acts, is a story of complete dependence on the guidance and the direction of God’s great wind called the Holy Spirit.

How do you look at the story of your life? Western culture says our story is just a rootless, directionless, incoherent exploration of the inner self. We want security more than adventure. We want what we call “rewarding interpersonal relations” rather than truth. And if we can find a place to rest and to feather our nests in blissful ignorance of the rest of the world, we settle there. (*Will Willimon, Anchor Commentary on Acts, p. 183*)

But Jesus the Christ says “Follow me.” Dare the journey. Experience “what it means to be so gripped by a vision, a truth, a yearning to tell what has happened,” that you would be as willing as Paul to put to sea, or to fly halfway around the world, to go to God knows where. (Willimon)

And if you dare to get up from your couch and follow him to the corners of the world, where exactly will you go? How will you know what direction the Spirit of God leads you? It is like sailing with the wind. A good sailor watches the ripples on the water and the flutter of the sail. He feels the wind on his face and the breeze on the hairs of his arms, and then he knows which way the wind will take him.

So it is with us who trust ourselves to the wind of God. We pay attention for every clue of the Spirit for direction. Paul paid attention in the middle of the night, when God would give him a dream, or a vision, or maybe even stood there by Paul in person. I believe God does that still, speaks to us in dreams by night or even day, or speaks to us in the words of a friend, or even in those moments when the hairs on our arms stand on end.

However the Spirit of God does speak to you, know this: the more attentive you are to the direction of God's Spirit, the more God will be able to send you where God wants you to go. May you have courage before the wind of God's Spirit.

-- Douglas E. Murray