

**Sermon Manuscript: Acts 27:13-26**  
***Steer a Course on Life's Stormy Sea***  
5<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost – June 27, 2021

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*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. As we passed to the lee of a small island called Cauda, we were hardly able to make the lifeboat secure. When the men had hoisted it aboard, they passed ropes under the ship itself to hold it together. Fearing that they would run aground on the sandbars of Syrtis, they lowered the sea anchor and let the ship be driven along. We took such a violent battering from the storm that the next day they began to throw the cargo overboard. On the third day, they threw the ship's tackle overboard with their own hands. When neither sun nor stars appeared for many days and the storm continued raging, we finally gave up all hope of being saved.*

*After the men had gone a long time without food, Paul stood up before them and said: "Men, you should have taken my advice not to sail from Crete; then you would have spared yourselves this damage and loss. But now I urge you to keep up your courage, because not one of you will be lost; only the ship will be destroyed. 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. Nevertheless, we must run aground on some island." [NIV]*

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A few years ago we crossed Lake Michigan on the ferry, the SS Badger. The lake wasn't very rough that day but there were some sizable rollers that caused the 400-foot ship to have a significant roll. There were some ladies who spent a good amount of time leaning over the fantail railing because they were seasick. Sea sickness is caused when the sense of balance in our inner ear does not agree with what we see with our eyes. Your ears sense one motion and your eyes see something else. The symptoms are dizziness, headache and nausea. Seasickness is the result of two parts of our body not agreeing with each other. There's a storm of sorts going on inside us because of this conflict. It's a storm that some of Paul's shipmates must've also experienced. That kind of sick feeling can also come when we experience other crises in our lives. How do we know what to do when we face life's storms? How can we **STEER A COURSE ON LIFE'S STORMY SEA?**

### **1. Maintain an Even Keel**

Today we sail with Paul and his shipmates through a terrible storm. The first thing that we will see is how important it is to maintain an even keel. The voyage that's described by Luke in Acts 27 is one that certainly did not go as planned. It is like many things in life. There's a saying that you have probably heard before. It says, "Man proposes, God disposes." This is a paraphrase of **Proverbs 19:21**, "*Many are the plans in a man's heart, but it is the LORD's purpose that prevails.*" Another way to put it is as a friend of mine with a special sense of humor one said, "We plan and God laughs." Things don't always go the way that we intend.

The story of this tremendous storm is part of Paul's journey to the city of Rome to face trial. He had been brought to a port on the southern shore of Turkey. The centurion who was escorting him booked passage for Paul and those with him on an Egyptian ship that was bound for Rome. It was probably carrying a cargo of grain for the imperial city as well as 276 passengers and crew. From there they sailed along the

southern shore of the island of Crete. It was the middle of October and time for ships to go into port for the winter. The owner and the captain of the ship wanted to make a little more distance when they had a stretch of fair weather. On their way to the winter harbor, they were caught in this tremendous storm.

Paul had warned them of the danger of making this journey. But the centurion followed the advice of the captain and the owner of the vessel and together they decided to continue on. The short trip to winter harbor of about the distance to Tomah turned into an ordeal they carried them 600 miles to the island of Malta and the destruction of the ship. That's as far as it is from La Crosse to Rapid City, South Dakota.

We cannot comprehend the terror that these people must have felt. We get a picture of it when we see the desperate things that they did in order to try and survive the storm. They literally tied ropes around the ship to keep it from breaking apart. They put out the sea anchor so that the ship would not plunge forward faster than it was able to endure. They threw the cargo and the rigging overboard in order to lighten the ship so that it wouldn't sink. Then after many days of enduring constant battering by the waves and the wind, they lost all hope of surviving the storm.

What do we do when the sea of life gets rough? We can rely on human wisdom and skill. Such things can be used in a good way. We see that in the story here. The captain and sailors used everything they knew in order to preserve their ship. But human reason can also be used foolishly and sinfully. Ultimately that's what led to this catastrophe where they thought that they could make safe harbor so late in the season. It was haste or greed or selfish desire or overconfidence that guided them to this decision to set sail so late. They chose to ignore common sense. To put too much stock in human reason is to trust in something that is destined to fail.

Another thing that we can do when the sea of life gets stormy is to put our trust in God and leave it all up to him. Such trust is a gift from God. But it can also be used sinfully and foolishly. We can claim that we trust God but we are really making him prove his power and love when we claim his protection or care in things that he has never actually promised us. When we ignore common sense such as going to the doctor or wearing a seat belt and claim that God will protect us, we are making him an accomplice to our foolish choices. We can also use such a claim to trust as a way of making ourselves feel superior to others.

Maintaining an even keel is to use what God has given to us wisely and in a God pleasing way. He has given us reason and intelligence. In the book of Genesis we read about the technologies that the first humans developed by the gift of reason that God gave them. They invented agriculture, metallurgy and musical instruments among other things. The skill it took to build the tower of Babel wasn't the sin for which God confused languages. It was their pride that led them to misuse their gift. Think of all of the innovations and inventions that make our lives in this world such a blessing. All of these things come from God.

But the use of human skill and reason must be directed by faith. Saint Augustine probably said it first but the version that I know best is attributed to Martin Luther. He said, "Pray like it all depends on God, then when you are done, go work like it all depends on you." Trust in God and the use of his blessings of reason go together. But faith and trust in God must always have the role of master in that balance. An even keel in the decisions we make in life as we sail life's stormy sea will consider both faith and reason in this way.

## **2. Remember Whose Hand Is on the Tiller**

Faith is essential to steering a course in life because it always makes us remember whose hand is on the tiller. There were 276 people on the ship with Paul. Almost none of them knew the true God. Most were

pagans who believed in superstitions and false gods. They believed that their lives were subject to random fate. This typhoon made everyone who was rational afraid. No one on that ship wanted to drown in the sea. You see their fear and desperation in the efforts they made to save the ship. You see it ultimately when they give up hope. Human reason and skill – no matter how hard they tried – couldn't save them. Their powerless false gods, superstitions and fatalism couldn't help. They were at the point of giving up. A little later in the story we read how some of the sailors tried to escape by taking the lifeboat. Paul convinced them to stay with the ship so they wouldn't be lost. Days and nights of wind, waves, rain, dark and fear took their toll.

But there was a difference between most of the people on the ship and Paul and the others believers. The believers surely felt fear and dread. It is only human to do so in such a crisis. Luke was with Paul and recorded this account. What he writes shows that he was more than concerned. But they had an advantage. They knew the true and almighty God. He is the God who told Job: *"Who shut up the sea behind doors when it burst forth from the womb, when I made the clouds its garment and wrapped it in thick darkness, when I fixed limits for it and set its doors and bars in place, when I said, 'This far you may come and no farther; here is where your proud waves halt?'"* [Job 38:8-11] They also knew God and his gracious care and protection. They were like Jonah who prayed from the belly of the great fish: *"The engulfing waters threatened me, the deep surrounded me; seaweed was wrapped around my head. To the roots of the mountains I sank down; the earth beneath barred me in forever. But you brought my life up from the pit, O Lord my God... Those who cling to worthless idols forfeit the grace that could be theirs... Salvation comes from the Lord."* [Jonah 2:5-9]

The difference is found when human reason and skill are combined with God's power and grace. God works through human reason and skill. He wants us to use them. Maybe you've heard this joke...

There was a flood. A man was forced to take refuge on the roof of his house. He prayed for God to save him. After a while a man came by in a canoe and offered to rescue him. The man refused saying that he had prayed and trusted that God would rescue him. The man in the canoe left. The water kept rising and the man was standing on the peak of his roof. He prayed for rescue again. Soon a man came by in a boat and offered to take him to shore. The man on the roof again refused. The boat left. Now that water was so high that the man was forced to climb to the top of his chimney. He again prayed. Soon a helicopter was hovering overhead. A ladder was let down. The pilot shouted for the man to climb up. Again he answered that he was waiting for God to rescue him. The water rose more and the man drown. When he got to heaven he asked God why he didn't save him. The Lord replied: "I sent you a canoe, a boat and a helicopter. What did you more did you want?"

God used the skills of the people on board the ship to try and save it. The ship itself was strongly built. It was manned by a skilled captain and crew. They took all the actions they could to keep the ship safe.

Think of all the ways that God blesses us and keeps us safe through human knowledge and wisdom. Think of the area of medicine. There are the miracles of surgery, all the medication's that we have, vaccines, therapies that help us recover from injury, antibiotics, and the ability to be protected from germs. Reason and science have given us pure water to drink and safe food to eat. All the different kinds of things that are done for public safety keep our lives secure from good roads to police protection, fire-fighting and the military. Although all of the technology for communication is vast and sometimes used for bad purposes, it also allows us to share the gospel of our Savior Jesus far and wide. And there are many, many more things we could consider! God provides good to believers and unbelievers alike in so many

different ways. As Jesus said, *“Your Father in heaven... Causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.”* [Matthew 5:45]

So let us steer our life’s course by remembering that God’s hand is on the tiller. He will guide you through all of the winds and waves of this life. Listen to his Word so that you might know his power and grace. Pray for his guidance and direction in your life. Ask that his will would always be done. Then use the reason, skill, common sense and wisdom that he is given to you. Act as if everything depends on you. But always humbly trust that all of it is in God’s hands. In the end, no matter what we do or what happens, our course on life’s stormy sea will go where God will. So keep your eye on the horizon.

### **3. Keep Your Eye on the Horizon**

Everyone on the ship had just about given up hope of surviving the storm. They were at the end of their rope. But God sent them reassurance through Paul. In the night God sent his angel or messenger to Paul. He had a message for Paul and for the rest of the people on the ship. He told Paul that he would survive the storm and make it all the way to the city of Rome. He said the ship would run a ground and be destroyed on an island. But everyone a board would survive the shipwreck. So Paul stood up before everyone else on the ship and told them not to lose courage. Paul’s encouragement was to keep their eye on the horizon. He told them, *“We’re going to make it because God says so.”* Many may not have believed the truth of what Paul said. But Paul told them what God intended and he knew himself that it was true because he belonged to God and served God.

God has sent his encouragement to the world through his Son Jesus Christ. This world is a mess that would swallow all of us in its churning maelstrom. The mess is the result of the damage that sin has done to this world. It’s made worse by the sinful abuses of sinful people. Often this is the result of people misusing the gifts of reason and skill that God has given. It also includes our lack of trust in God and our hollow self-reliance.

God has thrown the perfect life preserver to the world in his Son Jesus. The very name Jesus means “he saves.” Christ allowed himself to be engulfed in the hurricane of sin’s destruction. He not only endured the storm but he brought the calm of forgiveness through his suffering, death and resurrection. He has done for the world what he did on the Sea of Galilee that day when he calmed the storm by saying, *“Quiet! Be still!”*

He has put us among the crew of the storm-racked ship of this world. We belong to him as Paul did because he has bought us with his own blood. We serve him because we are his. We have received the message that our desperate shipmates need to hear. *“Don’t be afraid! Keep up your courage!”* There is rescue to be found in Jesus. God will bring us over the horizon to his safe harbor.

When the sea of your life gets rough, keep your eye on the horizon. We know the course the Lord has set for us. We know the white shore where we are bound because of Jesus. We know what the end of our voyage will be. When the storm is howling or even when it’s calm, keep your eye on the horizon. Use God’s blessings of reason and skill. Let them always be subject and guided by trust in God’s power and grace. Be confident that God will bring us through it all. He will accomplish the purpose of our salvation. As Paul had written to the Romans: *“We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.”* [Romans 8:28]

It is by God’s almighty and gracious hand alone that our course is steered on life’s stormy sea. But we are held in that hand by the grace that is ours from Jesus Christ our Savior. Amen.