Acts: “Lost at Sea”
Acts 27

Preamble: It is great to be back after a few weeks of vacation and renewal with my family. I want to honor and thank our youth ministry as well as Pastor Tami and Pastor Greg for their excellent leadership from the pulpit in my absence. I watched every service, and I was richly blessed.

As we get back into the swing of things this week, I want to take just a minute to speak to our plans for the fall. For the next three weeks, I will be wrapping up our series through the book of Acts that began in the fall of 2015! Can you believe it…we’re almost home. Then, on Sept. 9, we will kick off our Believe Series which will take us through to Advent. We will take a break from the Believe Series for an Advent Series focused on Generosity, and we’ll resume the Believe series in January through the end of May.

Now...as we anticipate the beginning of the Believe Series, I want to remind you that this series is a whole church effort. Our kids will be tracking with us in their Sunday School classes, the youth will be tracking with us in their groups and teaching, and we’ll be hosting dozens of groups throughout the community that will be tracking with us in the reading and discussing of each week’s theme. Now listen: If ever there was a time for you to invite your neighbors into your home to experience Christian hospitality and to explore the core spiritual truths of the Bible, now is the time. To that end, we have created an invitation that you can personalize for your group that can be handed out or illegally placed in mailboxes! You can pick up as many as you need on the way out this morning, and you can purchase whatever materials you need at our Believe Store in the lobby. Now...I know what you are thinking: your life is crazy…your schedule is crazy…your kids are crazy…your house is a crazy mess…and I must be a crazy pastor if I think you are going to host a group in your home! I get it…I really do. In fact, I challenge any family here to compete with the craziness of our family’s schedule as we currently have kids in college, high school, middle school, and elementary school! On top of that I have a somewhat demanding job as does my wife. Trust me, I get just how little margin most of us have in terms of time.

But I want you to know that Christy and I are hosting a group in our home this fall. In fact, this afternoon we will be canvassing our neighborhood and inviting people we know and people we don’t know to join us on this journey of Believe. And here’s why: we are convinced that God will give us the time and the margin that we need to accomplish His will for our lives. We are convinced that God wants us to care more about the eternal destiny of our neighbors than the condition of our carpets. We are convinced that this series will allow us to demonstrate care and initiate meaningful, life-changing conversations with our neighbors. And we are convinced that we have been placed in our neighborhood for such a time as this. Christians, let me ask you a question: if not now, when? If not the people who live within walking distance of your house, then who? If this is not God’s will for your life, then what is, and are you pursuing His will in way that aligns with Luke 9:23 when Jesus said, “Whoever would come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me”? Colonial, our mission is to BE the LIGHT of Christ
in a hurting culture so that the lost will be found, the broken made whole, the fatherless find hope, and our city is blessed. I challenge each and every one of you to consider your home, your apartment, your dorm room, your office at work…as a lighthouse on the shores of a dark and dangerous sea of confusion and disillusionment. There are marriages dissolving, careers imploding, teenagers taking their own lives, and countless souls getting sucked into various forms of addiction…right there on the street where you live, in the place where you work, in the school you attend. Despite their outward appearances, people are struggling to find their way in the darkness, and they someone to bring them into the Light. Listen: If Christ is in you, YOU ARE the LIGHT of the WORLD according to Matthew 5:14. The LIGHT that brings hope in the darkness lives in YOU, and the charge that our Master gave to each of us is this: “So let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.” Do you dream of being part of the solution…part of the life-changing, soul-saving mission of Jesus Christ? Here’s your chance: help those in your sphere of influence personally engage the Word of God in a safe environment, and watch what happens when people meet their True Father…it’s a game-changer. Please, please, please pray about hosting a group for your neighbors, classmates, or co-workers and invite them to consider what they Believe. If you can’t host a group, I hope you will commit to be part of a Believe Group this fall. The GroupFinder is published and features numerous groups you can participate in. Now…I recognize that, for some of us, there are needs and circumstances that would be better addressed through some other opportunities, and I want to highlight of few of those opportunities.

This afternoon our RE-Engage Marriage Enrichment group gets underway. For some of us, that’s where we need to commit our time, and I strongly support that decision. Three other groups are getting started this fall that I want to highlight. There is a group for men and teenage boys called, “Win the Sexual Battle;” a group called, “What to do when a Loved One says “I’m Gay”; and a group called, “Trauma, Hurts, and Losses: Awareness and Healing.” If anyone of those groups addresses some painful issues in your life or those close to you, I encourage you to engage those groups as the Lord leads you. For the rest of us, I sincerely desire for you to be part of this journey called Believe…and again, we’ll begin that journey on Sept. 9.

Alright…let’s turn our attention to Acts 27. I will not ask you to stand and read the entire chapter together, but I would ask you to open your Bible or your Bible app on your phone and follow along with me as we literally get into the boat with the Apostle Paul for an incredible adventure at sea. This scripture is largely travelogue, but I think we’ll find some meaningful applications to our own “journeys” as we near the end of our time together this morning.

Let’s begin with Acts 27:1-2: “And when it was decided that we should sail for Italy, they delivered Paul and some other prisoners to a centurion of the Augustan Cohort named Julius. And embarking in a ship of Adramyttium, which was about to sail to the ports along the coast of Asia, we put to sea, accompanied by Aristarchus, a Macedonian from Thessalonica.” (show map: https://www.conformingtojesus.com/images/webpages/pauls_voyage_to_rome_map1.jpg)
Alright, we’ll be spending a bit of time looking at our map this morning, so I hope you brought your glasses! Paul’s journey begins here, in Caesarea, which was the primary port city of the Palestinian province. This is where Paul has been imprisoned for the past two years. Luke reports that the entourage of prisoners, the Roman guard, and Paul’s friends (Luke and Aristarchus), embark on a ship of Adramyttium, “which was about to sail to the ports along the coast of Asia.” The ship’s final destination is Adramyttium which is way up here on the northwest shore of ancient Asia Minor, and the ports that Luke refers to here were well known and would afford them the opportunity to grab a different ship that would take them on to Rome.

Luke includes the name of the Roman centurion, Julius, which is odd to some degree, but we’ll see why in just a minute. Let’s see what comes next beginning with vs. 3: 

3 The next day we put in at Sidon. And Julius treated Paul kindly and gave him leave to go to his friends and be cared for. 4 And putting out to sea from there we sailed under the lee of Cyprus, because the winds were against us. 5 And when we had sailed across the open sea along the coast of Cilicia and Pamphylia, we came to Myra in Lycia. 6 There the centurion found a ship of Alexandria sailing for Italy and put us on board. 7 We sailed slowly for a number of days and arrived with difficulty off Cnidus, and as the wind did not allow us to go farther, we sailed under the lee of Crete off Salmone. 8 Coasting along it with difficulty, we came to a place called Fair Havens, near which was the city of Lasea.”

Paul and his companions don’t travel far before their first stop (show map). Sidon is just a short journey of some 60 miles from Caesarea, so we should assume the ship stopped to load and/or unload cargo for trade purposes. During this stop which could have lasted up to a week, Luke makes a point of complimenting the kindness of the Roman centurion, Julius, who allows Paul to spend some time with his friends and Christian brothers in Sidon during their stay in that city. When they resume their journey, they head north under the “lee” of Cyprus. Now…if some of you are unfamiliar with sailing terminology, I will do my best to quickly explain as we go. I actually learned a tremendous amount about sailing in the ancient world through a book I read on Paul’s voyage entitled, “The Voyage and Shipwreck of St. Paul” by James Smith. It is a profoundly detailed treatment of Acts 27 that is cross-referenced with ancient sailing logs and experts in maritime matters. I won’t have time to get into all the amazing insights that Smith writes about, but I will try to explain a few basic terms that will help you understand the text. First, let us agree that when it comes to sailing, the direction of the wind is everything, right? So…when referring to the wind as it relates to an island, there is the “windward” side and the “lee” side. The “windward side” is where the wind is directly blowing upon the coast. The “lee” side is the downwind coast where the wind is blowing offshore. So, as we look to the map (show map), Luke writes that the “winds were against us.” That means that the winds frustrated their desire to go northwest, which would have been the most direct route…which means the winds were likely west or northwest, which is typical for the Mediterranean in late summer. Thus, the westerly wind caused them to sail north, under the “lee”…the downwind side of Cyprus.

Luke reports that they then sailed across the open sea (show map) along the coast of Cilicia (Paul’s childhood home) and Pamphylia, until they came to the port of Myra in Lycia. According
to James Smith, once they made their way north to the coast of Cilicia, there would have been supporting winds coming off shore that would have helped them make their way west...in case you were wondering. It is here in Lycia, then, that they board an Alexandrian ship sailing for Italy. Why an Alexandrian ship? If you lived in the first century, you would know exactly what Luke was referring to here, because Egypt was the primary supplier of wheat for the Roman Empire. An “Alexandrian ship” was assumed to be a “grain ship,” one of the largest sailing vessels in the ancient world. (show pic of ship: http://1.bp.blogspot.com/-WedfxRRUXXE/T6F2X5dUNCI/AAAAAAAABHU/RsxdIN8daho/s1600/normal_rimtrade[1].jpg).

Luke writes that once boarded upon the Alexandrian ship, they slowly made their way along the coast of Asia to the port of Cnidus before heading south towards the isle of Crete. James Smith points out that Luke’s report makes perfect sense. The Egyptian sailors used the winds that typically generate from offshore to limp as far west as possible, but once they made it to Cnidus, there was no more offshore winds to leverage. So, they were forced to turn south, and doing so they could use a westerly or northwesterly wind to their advantage. (show map) The plan would be to sail to Crete, make use of the offshore winds on the southern coast to continue west, and then hope for a southern wind that would help them make their way up to Italy.

Luke writes in vs. 7 that they sailed under the lee of Crete off Salome (show map). Luke’s reference to Salome as the “lee of Crete” confirms that they were dealing with a westerly wind, which also explains vs. 8 when Luke writes, “Coasting along it with difficulty, we came to a place called Fair Havens, near which was the city of Lasea.” In Smith’s research I learned that the names of places like “Fair Havens” and “Lasea” have changed many times over the past 2000 years, so researchers have had to dig around to discern where Luke was referring to here in Acts 27. In fact, the harbor that Luke refers to on the south side of Crete no longer exists...it has been silted in due to a mountain stream that continues to pour forth from the south coast of Crete to this day. If you’ve ever traveled to ancient Ephesus in Turkey, you might recall that Ephesus was also a port city in the first century, but today it is miles from the coast due to the same silting process.

Now...this harbor was likely small, and half of it would have been open to the ocean. It’s getting precariously close to winter, so there is considerable debate about what to do next. Luke writes in vs. 9: Since much time had passed, and the voyage was now dangerous because even the Fast was already over, Paul advised them, saying, ‘Sirs, I perceive that the voyage will be with injury and much loss, not only of cargo and the ship, but also of our lives.’ According to the historian Josephus, Luke’s reference to the “fast” pointed to the Day of Atonement, which means we are in the fall, probably late September or early October, just before the winter months, when sea travel would be especially perilous (Bach, Acts, p 733).

Paul foresees a disaster waiting to happen and expresses his concerns to his captors. Paul’s boldness in addressing Julius and the ship’s captain reveals the obvious fact that Paul was a leader, no matter the circumstance. Leaders speak up, even when they are in chains. It’s pretty

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obvious that Paul is used to people taking his direction, and it’s also obvious that the Roman centurion and the ship’s captain were quite accustomed to ignoring land-loving prisoners! We read in vs. 11: But the centurion paid more attention to the pilot and to the owner of the ship than to what Paul said. (shocker) Going on Luke writes, “And because the harbor was not suitable to spend the winter in, the majority decided to put out to sea from there, on the chance that somehow they could reach Phoenix, a harbor of Crete, facing both southwest and northwest, and spend the winter there.”

(show map) So, as we return to our map, the plan is to pick their way along the southern coast of Crete and hopefully make their way here, to the port of Phoenix, that would give them a place to hide from a variety of fierce winter storms. Unfortunately, this boat will never make it to Phoenix. Let’s pick up the story at vs. 13: 13 Now when the south wind blew gently, supposing that they had obtained their purpose, they weighed anchor and sailed along Crete, close to the shore. 14 But soon a tempestuous wind, called the northeaster, struck down from the land. 15 And when the ship was caught and could not face the wind, we gave way to it and were driven along. 16 Running under the lee of a small island called Cauda,[b] we managed with difficulty to secure the ship's boat. 17 After hoisting it up, they used supports to undergird the ship. Then, fearing that they would run aground on the Syrtis, they lowered the gear,[c] and thus they were driven along. 18 Since we were violently storm-tossed, they began the next day to jettison the cargo. 19 And on the third day they threw the ship's tackle overboard with their own hands. 20 When neither sun nor stars appeared for many days, and no small tempest lay on us, all hope of our being saved was at last abandoned.

Luke reports that the Egyptian sailors launched out for Phoenix because they had a favorable south wind. In fact, a south wind would have made short business of making their way to Phoenix (show map). However, as often happens at sea in the late fall, a major storm develops over the Mediterranean, and they are suddenly caught up in the dreaded nor’easter. I’ve experienced these sudden changes in the weather at sea, and they are horrifying. You can literally go from summer to winter in a matter of hours, and I suspect that is what is happening here. What started as a nice warm, gentle south wind suddenly shifts to a cold, powerful gale from the northeast. Once the Egyptian ship enters into the open sea off the point of Fair Havens, a strong northeastern wind makes their trek northwest all but impossible. Luke writes that they have no choice but to “give way” to the wind such that they were “driven along.” Whereas their intended course was west/northwest, they are now being driven southwest. Luke observes that they caught a few hours of relative relief on the lee side of a small island called Cauda, or Claudia (show map of Claudia: http://bibleatlas.org/area/cauda.jpg), some 23 miles southwest of Crete, where they had just enough time to secure the ship’s boat. The ship’s boat would have been a small vessel that would be lowered down for excursions to the shore while the large ship stayed out in deeper water. The Egyptian sailors had been towing the ship’s boat because they presumed an easy journey from Fair Havens to Phoenix with a gentle south wind, so when they were struck by the nor’easter, the ship’s boat was being tossed around behind them, making steering a nightmare for the crew.
Luke reports that the crew also used “supports” to undergird the ship. James Smith writes about how the ancients would work straps or cables under the hull of the boat and then crank them down as tight as possible to keep the wooden ships from breaking apart. Luke also reports that they feared running aground on the Syrtis, so they “lowered the gear, and thus were driven along.”

The Syrtis Sands are found along the northern tip of present day Libya (show map of Syrtis: http://deeperstudy.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/danger-of-syrtis-768x585.jpg). According to two writers who were contemporaries of Luke (the Greek historian Strabo and the rhetorician Deo Chrysostom) the Syrtis had long, shallow sand bars covered with seaweed that stretched out miles from shore. A large ship like the Alexandrian grain ship (thought to be the largest vessel of that time), would surely have become stuck on the shallow bars, where either the crew would have died of starvation, their ship would have been beat to death by the storm, or at best they would have broke free and crashed against the rocks that protected the Libyan coast line. In order to avoid such a fate, the crew decides to “lower the gear,” which could mean taking down all the sails so as to slow down their progress towards the Syrtis. However, since the ship ends up near Malta, we might assume that lowering the gear also entailed a hard tack to the west, utilizing the two long oars that served as rudders for the ancient vessel (show pic of grain ship: http://1.bp.blogspot.com/-WedfxRRUXXE/T6F2X5dUNCI/AAAAAAAABHU/RsdjIN8daho/s1600/normal_rimtrade[1].jpg).

In vs. 18 Luke continues: Since we were violently storm-tossed, they began the next day to jettison the cargo. And 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 no small tempest lay on us, all hope of our being saved was at last abandoned.

I don’t know how many of you can imagine the horror that Luke and Paul and all those aboard this ship are enduring, but I can. I have been in high seas in an inappropriately small boat, and I can tell you that it is absolutely terrifying. These were experienced sailors on a large ship, so when Luke says they abandoned all hope of rescue…that should send chills down your spine. This is a massive storm. We’re likely talking waves in the range of 40-60 ft. high, and a boat that is quickly filling with water. Such is why they jettisoned the cargo and the ship’s tackle. They were doing anything they possibly could to lighten the boat…to buy time, but after being swallowed up in the storm for several days, they are simply waiting for the shoe to drop…they are convinced they will soon die. However there is yet One who has authority over the sea, and He has made his will known to the Apostle Paul, who will now address the crew with words of hope. In vs. 21 we read: Since they had been without food for a long time, Paul stood up among them and said, ‘Men, you should have listened to me and not have set sail from Crete and incurred this injury and loss. Yet now I urge you to take heart, for there will be no loss of life among you, but only of the ship. For this very night there stood before me an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I worship, and he said, “Do not be afraid, Paul; you must stand before Caesar. And behold, God has granted you all those who sail with you.” So take heart, men, for I
have faith in God that it will be exactly as I have been told. But we must run aground on some island.”

Can you picture this moment? An unrelenting storm. Lost at sea. The ship is filling up with water. The boat is breaking apart. You want to know what every sailor is thinking? They are all thinking, “the gods are angry.” In the ancient world, if you encountered huge storms and misfortune at sea, it was perceived as a curse from the gods.

Antiphon in On the Murder of Herodes argues for Helos' innocence on the grounds that all of Helos' sea voyages worked out well for him and everyone who traveled with him. In De Myst, Andocides answers a charge of impiety by relating a winter sea voyage where he survived pirate-infested waters, stating in conclusion, "the dangers of a trial…are to be regarded as the work of man, and the dangers of the sea as the work of God."

But notice, exactly at the moment when all hope has been abandoned, at that very moment when everyone else has concluded that the gods are angry, Paul makes a declaration of faith in the God to whom he belongs, the God whom he worships. Regardless of appearances, regardless of their presuppositions, God has not turned his face away from these lost souls who are currently without hope, beaten and battered by a storm that seems to have no end. On the contrary…God has seen their situation, and God is there. Paul speaks a word of hope to those who are hopeless. He calls them to take heart.

Church, how often do our lives end up looking like a shipwreck waiting to happen? With one phone call, with one diagnosis, with one lapse of attention on the highway, we can be right there…caught up in a storm that feels unending and unrelenting…void of hope and certain that we have come to the end. But for those who believe…for those who have faith…for those who belong to God—there is always hope! There is always hope!

God has a plan for our lives; God has a purpose; God is sovereign; and no storm, no threat, no evil of any kind…not even death can separate us from His love and His perfect goodness. There is always hope. And sometimes…when you are travelling beside those who are despairing, sometimes the greatest good you can do is to simply speak words of hope…just like Paul does here. Paul was a prisoner according to the Romans, but Paul was the CAPTAIN of HOPE for every person on that ship. His hope kept those sailors going, and I can’t help but wonder if that wasn’t part of the plan. Paul demonstrates a level of courage and faith that is rare but so desperately needed in this world. Christians…true followers of Jesus…will be those who speak words of hope when hope has been abandoned. We are those called to shine forth the light of faith in the darkest hour.

Now don’t get me wrong: a shipwreck will come…Paul even states that. But God will not abandon them. A shipwreck will dump this crew of men on an island they never intended to visit, but God will meet them there. A shipwreck will delay their intended schedule, but we’ll see that the shipwreck serve’s God’s schedule to the minute!
Friends…take heart. You may have made some terrible decisions in your lives. And like these sailors, your decisions may lead you and others to be tossed about in a horrible storm that feels as though it will never end…but there is still hope. God has not turned away from you. You may experience shipwreck, but that doesn’t mean that all is lost. God meets us where we are, and he can take our shipwreck and turn it into something beautiful. We’ll see just how God redeems this horrifying journey at sea next Sunday. For now, hear this word from the Lord who loves you: there is hope even now…have faith, trust God…He is a God who delights in saving those who are perishing. Call upon His name. Call upon the name that is above all names…the name of Jesus Christ. Ask Him to save you…and He will. Let’s pray.