

A photograph of a shipwreck on a rocky shore. The ship's hull is partially submerged in the water, with debris scattered around. The sky is overcast and grey. The title 'LIVING THROUGH A SHIPWRECK' is overlaid in large, white, outlined capital letters.

LIVING THROUGH A SHIPWRECK

Sunday 18 July 2021

SERMON TRANSCRIPT

At the end of chapter 21, we saw Paul set out toward Jerusalem in spite of the inevitable strife that would result. Agabus, the prophet, was spot on – and the next 3 years of Paul's life (which Luke oddly devotes a whopping 6 chapters of the whole book of Acts to) will see Paul arrested, imprisoned, and experience what it feels like this monotonous cycle of defending himself before military leaders and religious leaders and governors and kings. These 6 chapters remind me that the Christian life can be littered with disruptions and detours and seemingly dead-ends for reasons that we can't easily explain.

Well Paul is finally then dispatched to Rome to stand trial before the Emperor. So we come to chapter 27, and essentially Luke (who is travelling with Paul) tells the story of their fateful passage to Rome. And I am always amazed by what we are reading in Acts: here is a document that is almost 2000 years old which turns out, today, to be so accurate in terms of the meteorological and the nautical and the archaeological details.

So Paul and his party board a ship to Lasea. Then a second ship from there that was travelling from Alexandria in Egypt, to Rome. Now these Egyptian grain ships were the largest in their time and we read there were 276 people on board. Grain ships would bring produce all year round to Rome, with bonuses to captains who would risk the journey late in the year when the seas were high and the winds were blowing in the wrong direction. A captain would take the risk for the pay-off.

Luke records they were on one such ship, in a high-risk time, and they hit the perfect storm, and are shipwrecked on the island of Malta. Now there may be many things we can learn from Luke's biographical details in Acts chapter 27, but I want to take you on a different journey today; a journey I went on last year (2019) while reading Jonathan Martin's brilliant book, 'How to survive a shipwreck'. I'd like you to see Paul's voyage to Rome as something of a metaphor

for our lives. As a kind of meditation today I invite you to let the visuals of the next few minutes speak to you about your life, as you navigate the seas and the storms around you. I suspect that God might want to have a quiet word with you and with me, today.

The Ship

When it was decided that we would sail for Italy, Paul and some other prisoners were handed over to a centurion named Julius, who belonged to the Imperial Regiment. When we had sailed across the open sea off the coast of Cilicia and Pamphylia, we landed at Myra in Lycia. There the centurion found an Alexandrian ship sailing for Italy and put us on board. We made slow headway for many days and had difficulty arrive off Cnidus. When the wind did not allow us to hold our course, we sailed to the lee of Crete, opposite Salmone. We moved along the coast with difficulty and came to a place called Fair Havens, near the town of Lasea. (Acts 27:4-8)

Think of your life as like an old sailing ship: it's the vessel that people see. It's a cocktail of all of your relationships, your career, your talents, your reputation, your experiences. It's what's taking you places. It's what's opening doors. It's the people you hang with. It's the clothes you wear. It's your cargo of 'stuff' that you're carrying, owning, coveting, protecting, Instagramming.

The ship of your life is the life that you're living today; and just as a ship's captain hunts for favourable wind, you've been steering your life in certain ways so that it can move forward, day by day, to take you places in your career or your relationships or towards some unspoken destinations of your heart. Naturally, we protect our ship. As ancient sailors would warp ropes around the hull to protect it, we wrap boundaries around our lives. We look for safe harbour, safe places to anchor, to ride out the winter and (if necessary, if conditions get hard) we'll adjust to stay afloat: throw over the cargo, liquidate the assets. Sometimes we'll jettison all sorts of things for our lives to stay afloat – even the ships ropes and sails and anchors; or for us, the precious things, rather than abandon the ship of our lives.

Now it sounds like I'm saying the ship is your life – and some will say, "it is, that's it, you're just a vessel." But it's not; and we will soon see that you are more than all of this.

The Storm

When a gentle south wind began to blow, they saw their opportunity; 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, so the men hoisted it aboard. Then they passed ropes under the ship itself to hold it

together. Because they were afraid 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. (Acts 27:13-20)

The storms are the troubles and the trials of life. Storms come in all shapes and sizes, and their magnitude is really dependent on the person because we weather storms differently. Some storms are brief momentary events, like a tropical afternoon rain, and are overcome; we dry off and we move on quickly. But some storms are longer and more intense, where the wind and the waves seem to be unrelenting; like thinking that you'll be unemployed for a month, and it turns out to be a year. And some storms are perfect storms where several factors converge, all at the same time, to create a force that is terrifying and so destructive.

Some storms come from outside of us or are beyond our control; like a pandemic, or a bushfire, or a fight with cancer, or an accident, or a business that fails, or a spouse that's violent, or a child that's wayward.

Some storms are inside of us: a young one struggling to make sense of their identity; another gripped with depression or anxiety or bitterness or conflict; another life derailed by addiction or the shame of a very public failure.

If a storm comes and we can't avoid it, we want to at least make sense of it. We ask, "why is this happening to me?!" as if God were angry or absent or powerless to push back the wind and the waves of our situation. Maybe if we pray harder or if we have enough faith, will the storm clear? Well, maybe... But sometimes Jesus doesn't calm every storm. He may have rebuked the wind and the waves that night when he slept below deck during a fierce storm; but it also seems that most storms we have to go through, even if it means our ship is in danger of sinking.

Ship Wreck

On the fourteenth night we were still being driven across the Adriatic Sea, when about midnight the sailors sensed they were approaching land. They took soundings and found that the water was a hundred and twenty feet deep. A short time later they took soundings again and found it was ninety feet deep. Fearing that we would be dashed against the rocks, they dropped four anchors from the stern and prayed for daylight. When daylight came, they did not recognise the land, but there was a bay with a sandy beach, where they decided to run the ship aground if they could. Cutting loose the anchors, they left them in the sea and at the same time untied the ropes that held the rudders. Then they hoisted the foresail to the wind and made for the beach. But the ship struck a sandbar and ran

aground. The bow stuck fast and would not move, and the stern was broken to pieces by the pounding of the surf. The soldiers planned to kill the prisoners to prevent any of them from swimming away and escaping. But the centurion wanted to spare Paul's life and kept them from carrying out their plan. He ordered those who could swim to jump overboard first and get to land. The rest were able to get there on planks or on other pieces of the ship. In this way everyone reached land safely. (Acts 27:27-30, 39-44)

You've tried everything to hold on. Your options are exhausted, and so are you. The storm is too strong, and the ship is breaking up and going down as you cling to whatever you can from the ship, hoping for land or rescue. Here at Cape Banks lies the shipwreck of the S.S. Minmi; and it's been sitting here for over 80 years, wrecked one fateful night on these rocks by a heavy sea and a thick fog. The coal ship broke into two, and the crew scrambled to hold onto the sinking ship while they awaited rescue - which they were rescued! But the ship was lost.

They made it safely, like Paul and all 276 people on the island of Malta.

After your own shipwreck you realise that you're still alive, soggy and on the shore. The ship is in pieces, but you're still here. So much is lost, but you aren't because you now realise you are more than your ship. You can lose it all, but still be alive.

I've watched a lot of different 'shipwrecks'. Some are secret and some are painful spectacular with so much collateral damage. I think we will all, in time, face a perfect storm that pushes us onto the rocks and we see our beloved ship begin to break apart. Maybe it's a relational shipwreck; maybe it's your health (but just growing old will do that); or maybe it's a spiritual crisis; or a dark night of the soul where it feels like all of life has lost all of its meaning.

Maybe that's you right now? All of the things that defined you or charmed you feel like they're being disassembled, deconstructed, stripped back around you and you are powerless at the mercy of the waves.

Now I know this may sound negative - it may even sound, for some of you, unspiritual or lacking faith. But I think this is reality and is emotionally healthy; that the Christian life is not immune to suffering. It recognises that God is at work, not in the world as it should be, but in the world as it is; not in the ideals, but in the realities of life. Where do we meet God? Maybe in perfect conditions, sometimes... But from all accounts, it's mostly in the storms, it's in the shipwrecks, where we are changed. Renewal happens when you get to the end of yourself, your resources, your captaining of the ship, your attachments to the cargo.

Does transformation or renewal in life ever really happen when it's smooth sailing? I don't think so. It doesn't seem to. You see, like Paul on that voyage to Rome, nor the 3 years that

preceded it, God doesn't usually save us from the shipwreck – He saves us through the shipwreck. Or, to put it another way: God may need to save us from ourselves. Sometimes we spend so much energy trying to protect what God may want to deconstruct, precisely because He loves us, and even when we don't understand the 'why'.

After the shipwreck, comes the invitation to begin again, to reimagine, to discover a new way of life: perhaps simpler, less driven, less loaded down with burdens that you didn't need to carry and stuff you now know you don't need, and mostly a life that has found hope apart from the ship. The ship was never bad in itself, of course; but it's so easy to think that the ship is everything, to lose ourselves and God in the pursuit of all else and that which is so fragile and so impermanent in our lives.

So the storm and the shipwreck, in the end, may be a gift that brings you to a life of flourishing in faith and eternal hope; that your shipwreck is not the end of your, but it's the beginning of you. I've known so many people for whom this is their testimony: that their life was going fine until the storm of cancer or divorce or mental breakdown or career in tatters or a moral failure utterly smashed their life on the rocks. Maybe you know what I'm talking about? But the good news is that for all of them they found Jesus in a deeper way and a new life that was more flourishing than the one that they thought they could not do without. And they renewed their sense of assurance that even death is swallowed up in life. I pray that you too can know the same life in Jesus, today, regardless of the storms you're facing. Coming to Jesus doesn't remove the storms of your life, but you will have new resources to weather them and – in Jesus – you are unsinkable.

I hope that you might know in whatever you are facing in life right now, or whatever will come, that Jesus is someone you can hold on to and that He will carry you through whatever storms you might face.

Would you pray with me:

Jesus, you said that in this world we would have trouble but that we should take heart because you have overcome the world. I pray that we might know you as the overcomer of all the storms and shipwrecks that we might face. Thank you that you hold us in the midst of these crises of life and that you are faithful to bring us through. Thank you that our salvation is found in you, and in you alone. I pray that, for each one of us today, you would burn off anything within us that we see as a greater treasure than you. I pray that we would jettison the things from our lives that don't compare to the glory and goodness of knowing you as our friend and as our Saviour. I pray that, each one of us, we would allow you to carry us through all the seas of life and all the storms of life. Help us to put our trust in you, for you are faithful. We thank you that we can do this because you have demonstrated your great love for us through your life, your death, and your resurrection. We put our trust in you today. We thank you for this. In Jesus' name, Amen.