

Shipwrecks and Snakebites

Acts 28:1-6

After we had reached safety, we then learned that the island was called Malta. The natives showed us unusual kindness. Since it had begun to rain and was cold, they kindled a fire and welcomed all of us around it. Paul had gathered a bundle of brushwood and was putting it on the fire, when a viper, driven out by the heat, fastened itself on his hand. When the natives saw the creature hanging from his hand, they said to one another, "This man must be a murderer; though he has escaped from the sea, justice has not allowed him to live." He, however, shook off the creature into the fire and suffered no harm. They were expecting him to swell up or drop dead, but after they had waited a long time and saw that nothing unusual had happened to him, they changed their minds and began to say that he was a god.

Let me read you three headlines from one issue of The New York Times, and you guess when that issue came out, okay?

- **Mme. Curie At White House: Hoover Will Speak**
- **Western Union Handles Traffic 200% Over Normal**
- **Further Fall of Extreme Violence in Stocks in Largest Recorded Day's Business**

That date was October 30, 1929 – also known as the day following Black Tuesday, when the stock market took its fatal crash preceding the Great Depression. Good job. Let's try one more time, with another important date in history. And this one is more recent.

- **Brazil Leftists Oppose Deal to Let U.S. Launch Satellites**
- **Pirate Militias From Somalia Spill Into the Gulf of Aden**
- **Religious and Ethnic Clashes in Nigeria Spread, Killing at Least 165**

You might not recognize it, so let me give it away with another clue. Here's what the front page headline was. **U.S. Attacked: Hijacked Jets Destroy Twin Towers And Hit Pentagon In Day Of Terror.** The answer, obviously, is September 11, 2001. But who knew that on the same day, 165 people were killed in fighting in Nigeria? Some days, when there's big news, everything else gets eclipsed. The day the Challenger exploded. The day Kennedy was shot. Even the day OJ led the police on a low-speed chase with his white bronco. If anything else noteworthy happened on those days, it was pushed to the side, lost to history.

Our Scripture reading this morning is kind of like that. It's a little-known and rarely read story about Paul, who is on his way to Rome to appeal his case to the Emperor. It all started in

Jerusalem, when some Jews saw Paul giving a Gentile a tour of the city. They assumed that Paul also showed him around in the temple, even though only circumcised Jews were allowed inside. In their anger, the Jews confronted and attacked Paul, which led to a city-wide riot. Finally the soldiers showed up to quiet things down, and they determined the only way to end the riot and keep Paul safe from the violent crowd was to arrest him. So Paul was taken to the safety of a jail cell.

Paul appealed his case to every higher authority he can find. This goes on for several chapters as he tells and re-tells his story. Finally, as a Roman citizen, Paul appealed to the emperor. According to Roman law, he had every right to have his case heard by the emperor. So Paul set out for Rome on a prison ship. Now on the way, a storm began to brew. And I'm not talking about a little rain. This was a two-week tempest, complete with rain, wind, thunder and lightning, and huge swells in the sea. Paul tells us that it was so turbulent, no one could even eat. After 14 days of no sun, stars, or food, everyone was about to lose hope.

Just then, someone spotted land in the distance. The guards were afraid the prisoners would jump overboard and escape, so they decided to kill them all first. But Paul had made friends with one centurion who was able to interrupt their plan. So instead, they sailed toward the island. But before they got there, their ship ran into a reef and began to fall apart. Some of them swam into the land, others floated on boards that had broken away from the ship. But eventually, every single person on board made it safely to land. And that's where our story begins this morning.

The residents of the island were very kind, and they built a fire to keep the shipwreck victims warm. Everyone was optimistic about this encouraging turn of events. Imagine the great relief as they warmed themselves and started to share their personal adventures. Paul grabbed a

some wood from the pile to add to the fire, but then suddenly, out came a great snake, driven out by the heat of the fire. It latched onto Paul's hand. This has really not been a good day for Paul.

All the other prisoners whispered and gossiped. "After all that has happened, he's been bitten by a poisonous snake. He must really be guilty of something terrible. This is just the universe trying to make things even. He must be a murderer, and now he's going to die for what he's done." Paul, in an effort to save his own life, shook the snake off his hand and into the fire. Where a minute ago everyone had been boisterously telling stories, now there's an eerie silence as everyone waits for Paul to get sick and die. [Long Pause] But the eerie silence turns into awkward silence. Then everyone gets bored, until finally someone declares, "He's not dead; the bite isn't even swelling. No, he's not a murderer. To survive that snake bite, he must be a god!"

Paul goes from murderer to god in just a few hours. This is one of those Bible stories that would make a great Hollywood film. Think *The Perfect Storm* meets *Cast Away*. This is just a good story. But you'll rarely hear a sermon about it, because it's not anywhere in the lectionary. So this story, like Madam Curie at the White House on Black Tuesday, gets set aside and forgotten. Which is too bad, in my opinion, because in addition to being an exciting story, it teaches us two significant lessons about God.

First, we learn that despite what the prisoners think, Paul is not God. This is not the first time in Acts that the people have called Paul a god. In chapter 14, Paul heals a man whose feet were crippled. This is what follows:

When the crowds saw what Paul had done, they shouted in the Lycaonian language, "The gods have come down to us in human form!" Barnabas they called Zeus, and Paul they called Hermes, because he was the chief speaker. The priest of Zeus, whose temple was just outside the city, brought oxen and garlands to the gates; he and the crowds wanted to offer sacrifice. When the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard of it, they tore their clothes and rushed out into the crowd, shouting, "Friends, why are you doing this? We are mortals just like you, and we

bring you good news, that you should turn from these worthless things to the living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them.

Paul knows that he is not God, and in this moment, he gives all the credit and the glory to God. This reminds me of a moment in the movie *Ghostbusters*. At the end of the movie, one of the Ghostbusters, Ray, is talking to a woman who is possessed by a violent ghost. She asks him, “Are you a god?” In his innocence, Ray answers honestly that he isn’t. She, then, takes that opportunity to blast him with her powers. Later, the rest of the Ghostbusters say, “Ray, if someone asks if you’re a god, you say YES!”

But Ray and Paul both know and remind us that pretending to be god, or thinking we’re god, or taking the glory for God doesn’t mean that we actually are God. Most of us have probably never had anyone ask us, “Are you a god?” But we answer that question every day in our actions. Do you live according to your own whims, doing whatever you want at the moment? Or do you stop to ask what is God’s will, what would God have me do? Do you put yourself at the center of the universe? Or do you think first about how your actions will impact others? Do you take the credit for everything you have done? Or do you acknowledge that your gifts are from our loving God? Even when we do things right, even when we accomplish incredible things, we are not God.

The second lesson we learn about God in this story is that being a faithful Christian doesn’t mean your life will be free of troubles. Look at Paul. He went from being a conservative Jew who persecuted the Christians to one of Christianity’s strongest evangelists ever. And on this one afternoon, he faced a raging storm, a shipwreck, a hazardous ocean swim, and a bite from a poisonous snake. Clearly, sometimes bad things happen to good people. Being a Christian, believing faithfully in God doesn’t mean there’s some kind of magic force field surrounding us, protecting us from harm.

In the somewhat irreverent movie *Saved*, one of the teenagers is paralyzed from the waist down. He is explaining to his friend how it happened. He fell from a tree house, and his sister rushed him to the hospital. His sister refers to her own presence and quick thinking as “The Miracle that Saved His Life.” The boy’s friend replies, “The miracle you needed was not to fall out of the tree in the first place.” As we try to understand God, we want to know where God is in the story, where God is in our lives. Did God make the boy fall? Did God allow the boy to fall by not preventing it? Did God create gravity, even though with its benefits it also carries risk? Did God encourage the sister to be in the right place at the right time? Did God give the doctors the gifts and skills to keep the boy alive? How we answer these questions influences how we understand God.

It’s easy to say that good things should happen to good people and bad things should happen to bad people, but we all know life’s not that simple. For starters, how many people do we have who are 100% good or 100% bad? And more importantly, we have this insight from Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew:

But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.

The sun rises on everyone, and the rain falls on everyone. Sometimes the sun is good, and sometimes it causes droughts and heat waves. Sometimes the rain waters the crops, and sometimes it comes in the form of hurricanes or floods. Jesus reminds us that although God created the sun and the rain, God is not in the business of micro-managing the weather. God doesn’t direct it toward or against anyone or anything.

Why do bad things happen to good people, while good things sometimes happen to bad people? I’m not sure that’s the right question to ask. Instead of focusing on why bad things

happen, we should look at where God is in those times. And the answer, of course, is that God is with us. Whether good things are happening or whether we're facing storms and shipwrecks and snakebites, God is with us. John Wesley was fond of saying, "The best of all, is God is with us." And that is the good news. God is with us. What more could we possibly ask for? Amen and amen.