

Acts ~ Reimagine

Acts 27-28

Here we are, can you believe it? The final chapters of Acts. We've covered nearly 30 years of the early Christian movement...how it all got started and its early decades of development. This is our story...and it continues today...you and I have a part to play in its continued development.

So, it had been determined that Paul would, indeed, be sent to Rome to stand trial before Caesar. Luke does not tell us how long after the events of chapter 26 did Paul get placed on a ship. Was it days, weeks or months? Though the Romans, whose custody Paul was under, seemed to show him a fair amount of consideration, even kindness, they never seem to be in a particular hurry in dealing with him. Let's face it, in the grand scheme of running an empire, this little enigmatic Jewish/Christian rabbi was pretty inconsequential. (Except, of course, that we're still talking about him and learning from him today. It could be argued that this little man had as much impact on the world as the entire Roman empire. Retrospect is 20/20 they say.)

The travel log that takes up the lion's share of these final chapters reads like a first-hand account...and that's because it was. (Notice the "we" descriptions.) We're told in chapter 27 verse 37 that (at some point) there were 276 people onboard the ship. (Now, whether or not these 276 people actually started the journey with them in Caesarea, or that's just the count of how many people were on board at that time in the journey, is anyone's guess. Considering all the stops they made, it's quite possible that some people disembarked at certain points and went no further, or that some joined on at various points.)

We can safely say that Paul, Luke, and Aristarchus were on board for the duration. The centurion, Julius, was on board, and as the leader of 100 soldiers, those soldiers were likely with him. Verse 1 tells us that there were other prisoners as well. And, of course, there was the crew/sailors, the pilot, and the owner of the ship. So that's the manifest of the main players onboard the ship for this wild journey.

As I've reflected on this passage this week, it struck me that this little community onboard the ship is sort of a microcosm of society at large. You've got the government and military (politics) represented with Julius and his soldiers. You've got business/commerce and economics represented with the pilot, sailors, and owner of the ship (shipping, either people or cargo, is done for profit, not just transportation). You've got the religious/faith community represented in Paul and his friends. You've even got a small criminal contingent represented by the other prisoners.

I bring this up because it's interesting to observe how all these segments of society, these represented communities onboard the ship, interact with each other. Particularly, I find it perhaps instructive to see how Paul (representing the Church) interacts/engages with the other sectors of society. Even though I'm confident Luke didn't have in mind a metaphor/parable of

modern society as he penned this, let's look through that lens for a bit just for fun. (I'll highlight with an asterisk * the sections of these notes when I look through that lens.)

Even from the outset, the journey seemed to be more challenging than expected. Luke describes, "...*the winds were against us.*" (27:4) and "*We made slow headway for many days...*" (27:7), also "*We moved along the coast with difficulty...*" (27:8) as well as "*Much time had been lost, and sailing had already become dangerous because by now it was after the Fast.*" (27:9). The "Fast" refers to Yom Kippur/Day of Atonement. (That typically falls somewhere between mid-September to early October.) So, coincidentally enough, around now on the calendar. (For posterity's sake, I'm writing this in September of 2023.) If you're a Weather Channel watcher you know that this time of year is hurricane season as storms brew in the Atlantic ocean. The Mediterranean Sea's bad weather season is roughly the same.

* It's interesting that Paul interjects, presumably to Julius, the pilot, and the owner, that he believed it unwise to continue traveling (verse 9-10). But Julius instead listened to the pilot and owner of the ship. Now, to be fair, if you were Julius, would you pay more attention to a religious zealot in your custody or a seasoned pilot and the owner of the ship who, we would expect, had much more vested/at stake in this journey than Paul did? (Of course, any reader of Acts knows that Paul has spent much time sailing on his missionary journeys. It's not like he was completely inexperienced at this. Nevertheless, we can appreciate why Julius made the decision he did regarding who to listen to.) My point here is that the political and economic/commercial sectors of society (at least in today's world) can often dismiss the voice of the religious community, thinking something like, "*What does religion have to do with the 'real world'?*" The role, influence, and voice of the faith community is often minimized in public discourse. I also find it interesting that Luke notes, "*the majority decided that we should sail on...*" (27:12). As we know all too well—but it's good for us in democratic societies to be reminded—the majority can be wrong!

OK, let's get a little nerdy for a second (because, you know, I'm a little nerd at heart :) I did a little digging, wanting to know the difference between a hurricane and a Nor'easter (or Nor'easter). Here's what I found out. Both are low pressure weather systems that spin counter-clockwise and produce heavy rain and high winds. The main difference is that hurricanes are warm core lows, while Nor'easters are cold core lows. Hurricanes tend to form further south, while Nor'easters further north. From our vantage point, we see Nor'easters in the northeastern Atlantic (New England), while we see hurricanes around Florida and the Caribbean. (OK, enough geeking-out over meteorological events...)

There was no way to direct a ship in such conditions. As Luke puts it, "*The ship was caught by the storm and could not head into the wind; so we gave way to it and were driven along.*" (27:15) Talk about a helpless feeling...being completely at the mercy of a storm. It was such a desperate situation that they threw the cargo and tackle overboard (27:18-19)..meaning this journey was going to be a complete loss financially...but more importantly, "*we finally gave up all hope of being saved*" (27:20)

* Well, there was one guy on board who still had hope. Here we see one of the important roles of the faith/religious community in society, as represented by Paul. He spoke hope into a seemingly hopeless situation. But before he does that he gets in a little, “*I told you so...*” (see verse 21). Truth be told, I would have done the same thing...I’m not above that, I can admit it.

Now hope, to be truly hope, has to be grounded in something substantial...it can’t just be wishful thinking. So what was Paul basing his hope on? “*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.*” (27:23-26)

* Again, we see a good example of the role of the Church in society...to point to a bigger reality than can be seen; to draw attention to spiritual realities; to remind people that there is a God who is present and active in the (His) world. Additionally, and I admit I’m speculating a bit, but I think it’s a safe assumption...I suspect the reason everyone on board would be spared was because that’s exactly what Paul had been praying for. Assuming this is correct, Paul was looking beyond himself and was concerned about his neighbors onboard, and prayed fervently for their well-being. This is yet another picture of the role of Christians in the world...looking beyond ourselves and to the best interest of our neighbors and praying for them.

Notice also Paul’s sense of self–“*...the God whose I am and whom I serve...*” He understood, first and foremost, that he belonged to God. He was a dearly loved child of God. From that place of security he also served God...and as we’ve seen, with full-hearted, fervent, devotion. This reminds me of the words of our friend James Bryan Smith, “*I am one in whom Christ dwells and delights, and I live in the strong and unshakeable Kingdom of God. The Kingdom is not in trouble and neither am I.*” Paul understood his identity, and functioned consistently from it. This is a picture of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus.

* Paul was consistent...he didn’t waffle, and he remained calm. As they were approaching land, the water getting shallower and shallower, and with the difficulty of navigating the ship around the rocks with the storm still raging, Paul offered more encouragement and practical advice. “*Now I urge you to take some food. You need it to survive. Not one of you will lose a single hair from his head.*” (27:34) How great would it be, when in stressful situations, people could count on Christians/the Church to be calm, consistent, practical, and encouraging.

* Not only that, but Paul turned their attention to God yet again, in what appears to be worship and Eucharist (see verses 35-36). Even in the most extraordinary of circumstances we are to, we have reason to, worship God and invite others to do the same.

* Twice in this chapter we see that Paul had gained the favor of Julius the centurion. Earlier, in verse 3, we see that Paul was allowed to go see his friends during one of their port stops. And in verse 42 we see that when the soldiers wanted to kill the prisoners (including Paul), Julius stopped them. What would it take for those of us, as followers of Jesus, to gain the favor,

kindness, trust, respect of leaders of the wider community, while still maintaining enough differentiation to speak truth as needed?

As chapter 27 comes to a close, I admit to having a very (VERY) trivial question come to mind: Could Paul and Luke swim? Or did they have to use planks and pieces of the ship to get to shore? (If you're like me, this question is going to bug you all week. :)

More seriously, something to keep in mind is that not only was Paul familiar with sailing, but also shipwrecking. And this particular experience in Acts 27 seems a bit tame compared to his other experiences. Please allow me to share from Paul's own words found in II Corinthians 11:23-28...

"Are they servants of Christ? (I am out of my mind to talk like this.) I am more. I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches."

Everyone who had been on the ship made it safely to the island...Malta, as it turns out. The island natives were apparently quite hospitable...and quite superstitious. When Paul is bitten by a snake the islanders assume this "criminal" (it was probably obvious that he was a prisoner in custody) must be getting his just desserts. Then, nothing happens. So they go to the opposite extreme, he must be a god. This is not the first time people thought Paul might be a god. Recall back in chapter 14, in Lystra, after Paul had healed a crippled guy, the townsfolk thought he was a god.

The chief official of the island, Publius, *"...welcomed us to his home and for three days entertained us hospitably."* (28:7) Long before the days of hotels/motels, AirBNB and VRBO, people actually had people stay in their homes, fed them, and provided for their needs. Hospitality in ancient cultures—and in many places of the world today—was/is a much higher priority and value than we are typically accustomed to. (And it probably helped that a centurion was part of those in need of accommodations. Publius and Julius could appreciate their respective roles as servants of the empire.)

Though Publius likely thought he was doing a favor for Julius, the unexpected blessing came through the prisoner Paul, as Paul healed Publius' sick father. This, as we'd expect, opened the floodgates and all the sick on the island came and were healed. I have to wonder what Julius thought of Paul. He must have known the story that Paul was being sent to Rome with no official charges of being a criminal. He's seen Paul's cool calmness in the face of a horrendous storm

and shipwreck. Now he sees Paul healing people. I wish there was a way we could know what kind of impression Paul had on Julius. He had to be intrigued and curious.

* On that note, I also wonder what kind of conversations Paul and Julius had with one another. We're told that they were on Malta for 3 months...plenty of time for conversations. Additionally, what did Julius make of Paul's traveling companions Luke and Aristarchus, who were NOT in custody...they were on this journey by choice. I imagine Julius was intrigued by the relationship between Paul, Luke, and Aristarchus. In the extended metaphor I'm using, these three represent the Church. Just as their life and relationship with one another likely produced curiosity and intrigue in Julius (and probably others), so we (Christians/the Church) ought to foster similar intrigue to the world around us by our life and relationships with one another.

* Another way we see a picture of how the church can/should engage with the community at large is seen in how Paul ministered to residents of Malta. Even if we can't/don't "heal" anyone (though perhaps we should be more open to that than we are), looking for ways to be a practical benefit and blessing to those around us is always in order. Notice also how independently/autonomously Paul functioned. He didn't need or ask for Julius' or Publius' permission to minister to people. As a follower of Jesus, he understood his role in the world was to always look for ways to continue the ministry of Jesus in the world. Even though in custody, Paul didn't kowtow to the powers-that-be. I think that is instructive for us. We've already been charged/commanded by the highest authority...so we don't need to wait around for, or ask permission from, lower authorities in order to get to the task at hand. Let that play in your imaginations for a bit.

Verses 11-16 detail the rest of their travels to Rome. Below is a map/illustration of the journey to Rome we read about in chapters 27-28.



Though Luke breezes over it rather quickly, I think it's interesting to note that they encountered some believers along their final stretch to Rome, and even spent a week with them (see 28:14).

Additionally, we're told that some believers in Rome "*heard that we were coming.*" (28:15). Hmm, makes you wonder how these believers knew that Paul was coming. (I suppose with an unexpected layover in Malta, news of Paul could reach Rome before he did...but I'm still curious as to through whom did the news travel.) And again we see that Paul was not treated like an actual criminal, as he was able to live in something akin to house arrest.

Notice how quickly Paul got down to business. "*Three days later he called together the leaders of the Jews.*" (28:17) He was going to waste no time in setting the record straight. Perhaps he figured that if fellow believers knew about him coming to Rome, then maybe his opponents had also sent word to fellow Jews in Rome about the pesky "*troublemaker*". But Paul assumed incorrectly...they hadn't received any letter or report about him. But apparently they were interested in hearing more about his views, because "*...people everywhere are talking against this sect*". (28:22) They had certainly heard of the Jesus movement, and weren't really sure what to make of it. So who better to teach them more about it than Paul?

On the appointed day they all got together, and Paul did what Paul does best, what we've seen him do time and time again, "*From morning till evening he explained and declared to them the kingdom of God and tried to convince them about Jesus from the Law of Moses and from the Prophets.*" (28:23)

My friends, my brothers and sisters, let us never forget that this is the primary task of Christians/the Church...to declare, to explain, to invite, to represent, and to reflect the Kingdom of God, and the King Himself, Jesus, to those around us. This is our chief calling that everything revolves around. Of course, it's predicated on us being thoroughly convinced about Jesus and His Kingdom ourselves. (I think Acts does a pretty good job demonstrating that Paul was convinced.)

And as we've seen throughout Acts, when the Gospel is presented, some are convinced, while others do not believe. (28:24) This is what we can and should expect. When Paul closes his time with them, he quotes Isaiah as both a warning and an admonishment. His final words to them, I paraphrase, "*Salvation (the Kingdom of God) is open to all now.*"

Though Paul was limited, being under house arrest (even at his own expense), his ministry continued. "*He welcomed all who came to see him.*" (28:30). Note how Luke ends his epic tale. Just as Acts opens talking about Jesus and His Kingdom, so it ends, "*Boldly and without hindrance he preached the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ.*" (28:31)

It's possible to limit, to contain, to even kill Gospel messengers. The Gospel itself, however, cannot be contained. As we've seen throughout the book of Acts, any/all attempts to stifle it only leads to its further spread. The Gospel continues to go forth...unhindered. Praise God!

P.S. So what happened to Paul? No one knows the details for sure, but tradition tells us that he died around 64 AD by beheading under Nero. There is reason to believe (speculative though it

is) that he may have been released from the imprisonment that Acts ends with, only to be later arrested, tried, sentenced, and executed.

Possible Discussion Questions

- (Possible Icebreaker)...The book of Acts covers nearly 30 years. Share with your group what your life was like 30 years ago.
- (Possible Icebreaker)...Share any experience you've had of traveling by boat/ship. (Where did you go? What was the occasion? Was it enjoyable or not? Etc.)
- In your estimation, who are the top 3 most significant, most consequential, people who ever lived? (And what makes you think so?)
- This journey to Rome was horrendous, even traumatic. If you are willing (no pressure), share the most horrendous, traumatic experience you've had/endured. (I realize that's a tough ask. But I'm running on the premise that Table Groups are a community that knows each other deeply. But again, no pressure.) Or perhaps a variation of this question: What's the scariest situation you've ever experienced?
- What is the harshest weather, or meteorological event, you've ever experienced?
- When was a time when you were tempted to say (or perhaps actually did say) "I told you so."?
- How is your life shaped and directed by your identity as a beloved child of God and as a disciple of Jesus? (What's included in your life because of who you belong to and follow, and what's excluded from your life? How are you being formed by this most important of relationships?)
- Share a time when you received extraordinary hospitality. Conversely, how have you practice (or how do you practice) hospitality?
- As you consider your unbelieving or unchurched friends and family, what about Christians/the Church might they find interesting/intriguing? What might pique their curiosity?
- Do you think Christians/the Church are more passive/reactive or active and initiating when it comes to addressing issues in society? How do you see Christians/the Church relating to other sectors of society (particularly government and business)? What changes in how we relate would you like to see?
- Many people, particularly in the West, think Jesus is just an option among other options. Luke, in both his Gospel and Acts, doesn't allow for that. Jesus is either everything or He

is nothing. How convinced are you of Jesus? Convinced enough to stake your life on Him? Or, to ask this from a different angle, how have you seen people try to domesticate/tame/minimize Jesus? (This is something I expect to see from non-Christians, but it's particularly galling when Christians do it. Any church that does not keep Jesus high and lifted up, central, and preeminent is really no church at all.)

Soul Training Exercise ~ Looking Forward (the best is yet to come)...

You may recall the popular Bruce Springsteen song, "Glory Days". It is easy, even tempting, to look back on the past (the Glory Days) with sentimentality, with nostalgia, with longing. While there's nothing wrong with looking back on the past, reminiscing, being thankful for sweet memories, we can't live there or get stuck there.

Hope is one of the great virtues of our faith. Hope is always future-oriented. For Christians, our best days, our "glory days" are always in front of us, not behind us (no matter how good the past was).

Acts ends on a very forward-facing note...the Gospel continuing to go forth unhindered. This week you're invited to dream about the future. Remember in Peter's message on Pentecost back in chapter 2, quoting the prophet Joel, "In the last days, God says, I will pour out My Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, and your old men will dream dreams..." (2:17).

Since I've been at CUMC I hear a lot about what once was. I want to invite/challenge you to dream about what can (and Lord willing) will be. The same Spirit that raised Christ from the dead lives in you. The same Spirit that guided and empowered all the great things we read about in Acts lives in you. That same Spirit is still on the move...and you are an integral part of what the Spirit wants to do.

So dream, my friends. Sit with God this week and let your imagination, united to His Spirit, run wild. Then share your "brainstorming with the Spirit" with a spiritual friend.