

A Still, Small, Voice: Letting Go

Acts 27:13-44

February 1, 2009

When a moderate south wind began to blow, they thought they could achieve their purpose; so they weighed anchor and began to sail past Crete, close to the shore. But soon a violent wind, called the northeaster, rushed down from Crete. Since the ship was caught and could not be turned head-on into the wind, we gave way to it and were driven.

By running under the lee of a small island called Cauda we were scarcely able to get the ship's boat under control. After hoisting it up they took measures to undergird the ship; then, fearing that they would run on the Syrtis, they lowered the sea anchor and so were driven. We were being pounded by the storm so violently that on the next day they began to throw the cargo overboard, and on the third day with their own hands they threw the ship's tackle overboard. When neither sun nor stars appeared for many days, and no small tempest raged, all hope of our being saved was at last abandoned.

Since they had been without food for a long time, Paul then stood up among them and said, "Men, you should have listened to me and not have set sail from Crete and thereby avoided this damage and loss. I urge you now to keep up your courage, for there will be no loss of life among you, but only of the ship. For last night there stood by 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 the emperor; and indeed, God has granted safety to all those who are sailing with you.' So keep up your courage, men, for I have faith in God that it will be exactly as I have been told. But we will have to run aground on some island."

When the fourteenth night had come, as we were drifting across the sea of Adria, about midnight the sailors suspected that they were nearing land. So they took soundings and found twenty fathoms; a little farther on they took soundings again and found fifteen fathoms. Fearing that we might run on the rocks, they let down four anchors from the stern and prayed for day to come. But when the sailors tried to escape from the ship and had lowered the boat into the sea, on the pretext of putting anchors from the bow, Paul said to the centurion and the soldiers, "Unless these men stay in the ship, you cannot be saved." Then the soldiers cut away the ropes of the boat and set it adrift.

Just before daybreak, Paul urged all of them to take some food, saying, "Today is the fourteenth day that you have been in suspense and remaining without food, having eaten nothing. Therefore, I urge you to take some food, for it will help you survive; for none of you will lose a hair from your heads." After he had said this, he took bread; and giving thanks to God in the presence of all, he broke it and began to eat. Then all of them were encouraged and took food for themselves. After they had satisfied their hunger, they lightened the ship by throwing the wheat into the sea.

In the morning they did not recognize the land, but they noticed a bay with a beach where they planned to run the ship ashore, if they could. So they cast off the anchors and left them in the sea. At the same time, they loosened the ropes that tied the steering-oars; then hoisting the forsail to the wind, they made for the beach. But striking a reef, they ran the ship aground; the bow stuck and remained immovable, but the stern was being broken up by the force of the waves.

The soldiers' plan was to kill the prisoners, so that none might swim away and escape; but the centurion, wishing to save Paul, kept them from carrying out their plan. He ordered those who could swim to jump overboard first and make for the land, and the rest to follow, some on planks and others on pieces of the ship. And so it was that all were brought safely to the land.

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The word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

Before I read today's scripture – the text on which the third and final sermon in our series on discernment is based – I need to be honest with you about two things.

First, the reason I chose this text – which is not in any lectionary anywhere – is because my former professor at Columbia seminary, Dr. Christine Yoder, led a Bible study on it last summer that captured my imagination and attention. Second, I need you to know that until she taught that Bible study I had never heard this story before.

I am willing to guess that you have never heard the story I am getting ready to read either – so here is a little background. Paul is being held as a prisoner and has made an appeal to see the emperor in Rome. The journey to Rome is a perilous one. As today's scripture opens, we find Paul and other prisoners of Rome on a ship under the watchful eye of a Roman centurion named Julius. As it turns out, the centurion and Paul form an unlikely alliance from the beginning of the voyage. Just before the place where we pick up the story, the crew of the ship – against Paul's warning – decides to press on to their destination in spite of the storm that is gathering strength. It is here that we begin the reading...[read scripture].

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“And so it was that all were safely brought to land.”

Paul knew it all along. Paul was sure of God's plan. He was certain of the fact that all would be safe. It was this certainty that allowed him, in the face of hopelessness, to stand on the deck of the ship in the raging sea and declare to the huddled and fearful mass of men on board that all would be well.

Of course, Paul was also clear that God's goal was the salvation of the community on board the ship, not the vessel itself.

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Within the folds of this strange (and long) story of Paul's voyage to Rome, are some dramatic claims. We cannot overlook the fact that this story is located in the book of Acts – and the book of Acts is a

book about the Church. A few months ago, I preached a sermon on Matthew's account of Jesus walking on the water to meet his disciples who were huddled in a boat amidst a raging storm. As I said then – when you hear about boats in the New Testament – think about the church. And so I say it again now – when you hear mention of boats, especially in the book of Acts – think about the Church.

Paul's boat is filled with people who had competing loyalties and visions for what mattered the most. There were agents of Rome – including the centurion who befriended Paul – who sought to carry out the will of the empire. There was a captain and the crew – who cared dearly for the ship and its safety. There were prisoners of every stripe and color. Paul's ship was a microcosm of the world in which he lived – a representation of competing interests.

It was God's will that all would be saved – but as we see in the story, there are occasions where self-interest almost endangered the promise of salvation. When the storm was at its most fierce, some of the sailors tried sneaking away in the lifeboats. Paul warned, “unless these men stay in the ship, you cannot be saved.” And the centurion ordered the lifeboats to be cut off from the ship and tossed out to sea.

When the ship ran aground on the rocks, the Roman soldiers thought it best to kill the prisoners so the soldiers would not bear the responsibility for their escape. But the centurion kept them from carrying out their plan.

God's plan of salvation for all on board the ship depended on all on board the ship staying together.

What mattered was the community, not the ship. Think about what happened to the ship. First, they tossed the cargo. Next, they threw off – with their own hands – the ship's tackle. The life-boats were cut and cast off. Then the anchors. Then the food. Finally the sail.

In the end – all arrived on the beach; some who swam, others who floated in on the remaining splinters of the boat. And God's plan was fulfilled.

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A short time out of Columbia Seminary I joined in a group of classmates who met over a three year period to talk about some of the issues that faced the Presbyterian Church. There were ten of us. Half of the group were people who were right in their theological understanding of the issues that faced the church. The other half were people who disagreed with the half of us who were right.

At the time, each of us served different kinds of churches; some large, some small; some evangelical, others progressive – all of which were trying to faithfully follow the will of God through their ministry and mission. The trouble was, we disagreed about some of the details of what it meant to be faithful.

When our group met – we did not dance around the issues that divided us. In our conversations, we sharpened our thinking by good and healthy debate. Our conversations also helped each of us to see that “the other side” was doing their best to seek the will of God; they were not the faithless demons we imagined them to be.

My time with this group of friends and colleagues taught me more about what it means to be church than almost anything else I have done. It was a formative time in my journey as a pastor.

After three years of meeting together, not one of us changed our minds about anything except for this: we knew that we needed each other to be the church that God intended. That didn’t mean the things on which we disagreed weren’t important; they were and they are. But it meant that what was more important than our disagreements was a commitment to stay together as the church.

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You may not know it – but each of you is sitting dangerously close to someone who disagrees with you. Just beside or behind you in the pew is a person who holds a different view on many things theological, political, or philosophical.

You probably have sound arguments – reasoned, measured, even biblically based – for why you believe what you do. The person sitting near you does, too. You may not be able to be convinced that you are

misguided in your beliefs. Neither are they. And yet here you are – here we are – in each other’s company and in the presence of Almighty God to worship this morning.

We are called – together – to discern the will of God for this congregation. There are some churches that have an easier time of it than we do. There are churches that are more homogenous than us; churches that don’t reflect as broad a spectrum of political or theological or philosophical diversity as we do. And I believe that we are the better for it.

As a church – we have been committed to live together as a particular congregation for 164 years. I’ve only been around for one of those years. I bet some of you who have been a part of this church a little longer than that can tell me about the joyous and the painful chapters in this congregation’s voyage. Being community with a group that represents competing interests is not always the easiest thing – but that is what, in God’s wisdom, the church is called to be.

We have some important decisions ahead. I am not just talking about a capital campaign – I am talking about the future of this church beyond the capital campaign. The ground is shifting under our feet. The neighborhood in which we are called to do ministry has changed and will change. The way people understand how the church relates to the culture around it is an emerging and fascinating topic of conversation. The picture of what constitutes a family is a work in progress; and an increasing absence of extended families opens up a huge need for churches to nurture one another well.

As we navigate these decisions; as we seek to discern God’s will for our life together over the next 164 years – it is important that we are clear about our goal. In our constitutional documents, the church is called to be “a provisional demonstration of what God intends for all [creation].”¹ We bear that out by valuing worship that is rooted in our tradition, community that is built on warmth and openness, outreach that focuses us on meeting the needs of others, education that takes seriously loving God with the life of the mind, and diversity that celebrates the fact that we are not all alike.

¹ *The Presbyterian Book of Order*, G-3.000

I trust those five core values sound familiar; they represent what you said was distinctive about this congregation. They are how we understand God to be calling us as a church.

God calls us to work toward this goal *together*. Through our mission and ministry – we are to be the demonstration of what God intends for all creation *together*.

Along the way, we may have to throw some of the things we think we need overboard. What those things are for you – I don't know. I have an idea of what some of those things are for me; and I will tell you that it will be hard to toss them away.

But where we are going is more important than the ship we are currently on; and God does not want just one group, or one viewpoint, or one opinion to make it to our final destination. God wants us to arrive together.

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May it be so with us. Amen.