

January 26, 2020 Grounded Firm and Deep in the Saviour's Love Acts 27:39-28:10, John 17:20-26

Our family was travelling across the country one summer when we visited friends in Winnipeg. I happened to look in the newspaper and see that the husband of a cousin of my mother had died. Jean and I attended the funeral. One of the hymns that was sung was an old Methodist favourite, "Will your anchor hold in the storms of life, When the clouds unfold their wings of strife? When the strong tides lift and the cables strain, Will your anchor drift, or firm remain? Refrain-We have an anchor that keeps the soul, Steadfast and sure while the billows roll, Fastened to the Rock which cannot move, Grounded firm and deep in the Saviour's love." It seemed strange to me that there we were, smack dab in the middle of the country. We were celebrating the life of a man who was probably never in anything more than a rowboat on the Red river. But even one 'born and bred' on the prairie could relate to the assurance offered through that hymn. The assurance of the presence of God, made known to us in our time of being most vulnerable.

One does not need the special effects of Hollywood to make Paul's journey as depicted in the book of Acts chapter 27-28 into a real nail-biter. At many places along the way, we might expect his ship to break into parts at any minute-last week we heard about the first part of Paul's journey as prisoner. This week we pick up on the end of the journey as the ship encounters the shallows of the shore of Malta.

We can imagine the scene on the beach. Publius had heard this commotion coming from the beach. Presumably, he grabbed some clothes and ran out to see a scene he could never have dreamed of. Publius, the magistrate, began to pick his way through shards of wood and shivering bodies. The sun was barely up, and villagers were already rushing down there with blankets, others brought dry clothing, fresh water and food. "What a way to wake up," he must have thought, shaking off the last vestiges of sleep, making room for the excitement and worry this was bringing to everyone's attention. As they later told the story, "there must be nearly 300 people washed ashore and crawling their way like drunken crabs spilled from the ship's wreckage, desperate to reach solid sand."

Publius was among those barking orders to others as he put on his leader's hat. He didn't know whether these foreign sailors would even understand his language or what kind of disease they could be bringing to his island. As he watched the actions of these newcomers he was putting together an impression that most of these 'scrawny looking men' were actually prisoners and then there were the better dressed overlords circling them so they would not flee. "Help those men out there struggling to stay afloat, the ones holding on to planks from the ship!" "Bring more blankets and water, and firewood. Guide them to the firepits over there, where they can begin to get warm."

As Publius saw all the people gathering around those campfires he wandered among them and surveyed the sea. From his vantage point up on the beach he was amazed that there was not a single body floating in, it appeared that among these hoards not one had drowned. How could that be? His people were used to fetching such people from the sea when there arose big storms, but rarely did everyone make it to dry land safely. Usually they came in groups of 20 or 50. Who or what was looking over this massive crowd of people 'chucked' in to the ocean? How in the world could they all have survived?

We might have expected, Publius would soon find two leaders from the ship arguing. Paul, the one we think we know, that hyperactive, born-again, staunch follower of Jesus Christ, who seemed to have taken charge on the voyage and they took his advice, barreling in to the shallows and abandoning ship en masse. Then there was a Roman centurion, we'll call him Julius. Presumably, Publius beckoned them to a campfire to get warm and be fed too. They began to tell their story.

We might expect Paul to assert himself above the rest. Their ship had set sail from the land we now know as Israel north west, on its way to Rome. They made slow headway through the rough, unprotected waters to the lee of the Island of Crete, but they had been unable to dock until Fair Haven Harbour. The sailing season should have been over and Paul told them so. But he continued, "they didn't listen and we pressed on and got caught by a nor'easter of hurricane force and had to luff our sails and just let the wind take us toward shore."

They guessed they had been at least two weeks in the raging storm. Every body on-board had been sick and they went most of that time without any food at all. Paul said he came up with a plan. An angel had told him

that he had to make it to Rome, and if they all stayed together (no one could abandon ship), they'd all be saved even if the ship was lost. Julius and most everyone else was not impressed with Paul's plan. But in the end, for some reason, he seemed the bravest among them, so they gave in to his direction. Paul hosted all on the ship to a eucharist as he broke the bread and offered it up giving thanks to God. There was a point where some tried to escape by the small lifeboat but Paul saw what was happening and the life boat ended up being cast aside into the foaming surf.

Perhaps Publius interrupted the long tale and made sure the two had food and then suggested they attend to the survivors. Paul organized the gathering of food and firewood. Julius began to tend to the wounded and traumatized ones. Paul grabbed some driftwood that had been harbouring a snake. The natives of Malta noted this and drew back suspecting the gods were getting even with Paul through this snake bite. He had survived the vicious voyage but they suspected he might be a murderer. But then they saw Paul just shook the viper off into the heat of the fire. The natives thought surely he was bitten and would begin to react to the bite, swelling up and maybe even dying. But when there was no reaction, the Malta rescuers figured Paul was some kind of 'god' himself. From these reactions we can presume that the Maltese had beliefs in pagan gods of nature. Another piece of information we have is that, the figureheads on the boats of the area were carvings of 'gods of the sea'.

There was a curiosity and compassion that the natives had for the survivors of the shipwreck. They were treated with uncommon kindness. The chief magistrate entertained Paul and some followers for three days. Publius' father had dysentery, with a high fever and dehydration. Paul prayed with this man, laid hands on him and healed him. Some commentators speculate that Paul may have been in the company of the writer of Acts, Luke, known to be a physician. We are told that once word got out about what had happened to Publius' father, "the rest of the people in the island who had diseases also came and were cured." The Greek word used here can be translated, *received medical attention*. Paul, in giving of himself gave healing to others.

A number of Christian churches have come together to worship and pray together within this Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. The resources have been brought together by the churches of Malta. There are a number of theological points we can glean from this worship theme which has been brought together, "They showed us unusual kindness," a quote from the latter part of the reading from Acts 27-28. What does this passage and the gospel today tell us about our relationship with the world and one another on in to the future?

The gospel takes us back *before* Easter to Jesus' last meal with his disciples. We're sitting at the Passover table, leaning close to hear Jesus' final promises to his disciples. Chapter 17 is Jesus' closing prayer. He looks up to heaven and prays first for himself. This is not the agonizing prayer in Gethsemane found in the other gospels. Jesus is not in agony nor is he confused. "Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you." Sometimes, Jesus seems to be praying for somebody else -- he says "your Son" then "the Son" then "glorify me." We hear a mixture of Jesus and the gospel writer mingled together in one prayer.

Then Jesus moves on to pray for those who are sitting at the table with him. Jesus is praying like a mother who has adopted these children. They belonged to God, but God gave them to Jesus to care for, to teach, to nurture. Soon Jesus will go away and he prays for these children with the love of a motherly heart.

Jesus' prayer doesn't stop with those seated at the table. "I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one." Jesus is praying also for you and for me. We are the ones who have come to believe because of the disciples' words. Jesus' prayer hangs in the space between earth and heaven, between time past and time present and time yet to come. Jesus is praying that we will remain faithful and trust in the presence of the Holy Spirit. Jesus is praying for family unity among his adopted children.

Just in this last week, the wife of a colleague in his early 70s died suddenly. We have worked together in regional and national aspects of our United Church. His response to the sympathies we extended struck me as being applicable to our situation today. "Yes, life is not always what we want. We remain surrounded by family, friends, even strangers, but always by God's mysterious love."

It is Paul that is extending the transforming message of Jesus Christ to his fellow prisoners, guards, captain and crew on the ship they must abandon. We might expect that Paul used opportunities to tell his conversion story to the people of Malta, though the detail is not recorded. However, it is the people of Malta, these believers in foreign small 'g' gods who show "unusual kindness." Is it inconceivable that God's mysterious love is extended to us through those who do not even know God? I don't think it is. For the earth is God's realm.

Perhaps we need to continue to bear this in mind as we endeavour to offer the Good News of Jesus Christ in our worship, in our outreach, in our daily conversation, in our community leadership, in our daily life. This has implications for our 'Communities of Faith' as this small village of Caledon East grows exponentially over the next 5 years.

In a few moments we will sing, "They will know we are Christians by our Love." Just as the people of Malta observed Paul who exuded his faith in his life, people are looking at us. They are looking at us as individual Christians and I think they are observing how well we can work together. Last week, father Chris told us about a study about the Anglican Church of Canada which indicated the decline in numbers continues. Perhaps our continued work together can bolster all of us and present to the world a stronger uniting passion for God's love.

As we heard last Sunday, our reading from Acts clearly shows that maintaining the ship is not the most important matter. Paul was clearly told that all would survive, but the ship would not. Perhaps we need to bear in mind that the Christian faith will survive, but not if we individually 'jump ship' or if we hold on to the 'church' remaining the same.

I was at a seminar last week about church's involved in social innovation. We heard from Shaun Loney who has become a recognized leader in creating non-profits that do good work, care for the earth, and employee people who have had difficulties with employment. I have had a chance to spend some time with Shaun at his office in Winnipeg and he asks some very good questions. He would have us use our resources to create opportunities, not be people asking our government to help us out. I'll give you just one quick example. He says, "take note of the trends."

Has anyone here today been on the Camino walk? The **Camino de Santiago** is one of the most famous and some say, the most rewarding pilgrimage walks or hikes in the entire world. The route was originally a pilgrimage to the remains of St James, (or Santiago in Spanish), in Santiago de Compostela. The earliest evidence of this pilgrimage taking place is from the 9th Century. For hundreds of years afterward, pilgrims would walk to this sacred site in order to visit the divine location – the shrine of one of Jesus' 12 apostles.

Most hikers, today now walk the route mainly as a physical challenge, but for many, the journey still has spiritual meaning. The route is becoming more and more popular every year. There are estimates now that indicate as many as 350,000 do the route in any given year.

In the 21st century, the idea of a pilgrimage is perhaps quaint. However, the effort of walking for a month and being disconnected to modern devices is immensely liberating for many. Leaders at our maritime seminary (AST) asked, "why do people have to go all the way to Spain?" "We could offer a Camino walk here with many of the same aspects." And so they did. Their 2019 season was a great success. 55 pilgrims followed the 'Way of St. Columba', exploring both interior and exterior landscapes in beautiful Nova Scotia. Why couldn't we do the same right here on the TransCanada Trail? Give it some thought.

Studies show that despite our young adults today, not finding that regular church attendance speaks to their need, there is still a spiritual searching going on to find deeper meaning in this fast moving world with our first world, upwardly mobile desires. Could our churches and other locations on the trail not provide opportunities to take that outward and inward journey, reflecting on the wonder around us, reflecting on God's word for us over a week that could provide inspiration for participants? I think it is worth exploring.

We have an anchor that keeps the soul steadfast and sure while the billows roll, fastened to the rock which cannot move, grounded firm and deep in the Saviour's love! Amen.