

Acts 27:1-12 To Rome IV: Setting Sail

Preface:

Oh, People of God. Do you ever look at an old photograph, and are a little appalled at, I don't know, how short your shorts were, and how big your glasses or bangs were, and how many pastels you had on, and think, "What was I thinking?" Or you plan for a year some huge family vacation or trip or something, and when it happens, it's chaos and terrible and everyone gets food poisoning, and all you can think is that "It seemed like a good idea?"

That's how I feel about having just this bit of Acts 27 set apart for our worship service today. It seemed like a good idea, but as I prepared for this morning, I was just, like, "What was I thinking?"

The passage is small enough for us to consider all of it. So let's. First, we'll pray. I think by the end of the morning we'll have something we can reflect on, and doing so can position us for virtue.

Prayer:

Preparing To Go:

Finally Paul is headed to Rome!

Luke will never tell us what charges Paul has against him, what he goes to Rome charged with. We'll never see Paul stand before Caesar or hear from Caesar. We'll never see how Paul's life ends, or what his future holds. What we realize is that Luke has included all the stuff in the last few chapters to reveal to us Paul's integrity, his purpose, the ways his antagonists are unable to thwart God's purposes for him. Behind it all stands God's protection of Paul and use of Paul's circumstances to get Paul where God wants him to be. Paul's not the only one going places, though.

Luke's with Paul again, now. And so is Aristarchus. Aristarchus was grabbed by a mob way back in Ephesus, early in Paul's trip to Jerusalem. He later escapes, apparently, because goes with Paul to Jerusalem, too. He's mentioned in a couple of Paul's letters: Colossians and Philemon. And in Colossians, Paul even calls him "my fellow prisoner." And I don't think it's a stretch to suggest that whatever charges Paul has against him, Aristarchus may be facing these same charges, may have been caught up in the situation Paul finds himself in, facing the same enemies Paul faces, and Luke just hasn't shared that

with us. Aristarchus may have even followed Paul's lead in appealing to Caesar. Aristarchus is not the lead in this story Luke's writing, but he was no dim star for the church at Thessalonica, where he was from. And I think it's important to realize, for a moment, that while this is Paul's story, it's a story that has all sorts of people wrapped up in, because they're wrapped up in the Gospel together. Aristarchus' situation mimics Paul's, like a shadow mimics movement. We don't know what happens to him, only that for a time Paul can call him "my fellow prisoner," and mean it.

They prepare to sail. We read this:

27 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. 2 We boarded a ship from Adramyttium about to sail for ports along the coast of the province of Asia, and we put out to sea. Aristarchus, a Macedonian from Thessalonica, was with us.

Here's a map of all this. It's in your bulletins, too, of course:

(Map; Explain)

A Visit:

Remember, here, that this group is along for the ride. The ship is already going places. It's not really likely that the ship is commandeered by the Empire, but Julius is an authority, and can intervene. The passage of he and these prisoners is almost certainly paid passage. Luke may be paying his own way, or acting as ship doctor or surgeon. And the first stop on the way is Sidon, not far up the coast, and not far south of Antioch, Paul's patron congregation. Sidon basically never gets anything right in the Bible, not even in Acts, but they at least have places where Paul's friends can stay. We read this:

3 The next day we landed at Sidon; and Julius, in kindness to Paul, allowed him to go to his friends so they might provide for his needs.

This is a win for Julius, right? "in kindness to Paul." Luke's view of Julius is basically favorable, and we'll discover why at the end of the chapter. But Julius is a soldier, a commander, not a sailor. And in matters of sailing, we'll see shortly how he fails. But first they're all going to switch ships.

Switching Ships:

4 From there we put out to sea again and passed to the lee of Cyprus because the winds were against us. 5 When we had sailed across the open sea off the coast of Cilicia and Pamphylia, we landed at Myra in Lycia. 6 There the centurion found an Alexandrian ship sailing for Italy and put us on board.

This ship has been going all the way around the coast, up from Alexandria. They're more than halfway to Italy, and they take on this crew. But things begin to slow down; they want to keep going the northerly route, cover the north part of the Mediterranean, but the wind is the wind, and they can't fight it:

7 We made slow headway for many days and had difficulty arriving off Cnidus. When the wind did not allow us to hold our course, we sailed to the lee of Crete, opposite Salmone. 8 We moved along the coast with difficulty and came to a place called Fair Havens, near the town of Lasea.

(Map Again)

They finally make it to Crete, and inch along the outside of it, avoiding the inland-blowing winds, which at best would push them all the way back to Caesarea if they aren't careful, or south to Alexandria, to Egypt. And because this is all taking so long things are about to become even more difficult for them. Luke writes,

9 Much time had been lost, and sailing had already become dangerous because by now it was after the Day of Atonement.[a]

Two things here: This means something to them that means nothing to us, and it's meaning in that regard is simply that after this day, you shouldn't be sailing. The Day of Atonement is the day you don't try to push through the middle of the Mediterranean. Everyone knows that, right? I shouldn't have even had to mention it. The other thing to mention is this Day of Atonement, or Yom Kippor, which is, oh, like Jewish Christmas in that even secular Jews, like many of our non-Christian neighbors, will celebrate it. It's the highest holy day in Judaism, the "Sabbath of Sabbaths," and has all sorts of religious importance and significance. Just like Easter moves around,

because it's based on the Jewish calendar, Yom Kippor moves around because, you know, it's based on the Jewish calendar. It falls in between mid-September and mid-October. It was October 9th this year. What I think is really, really interesting is how Luke references this Jewish day as the day you don't sail past, but he's writing for primarily a Gentile Christian audience. At the very least, we have to remember that the Church was far more clued into the Jewish religious calendar than we are now, and to use this way to talk about this might be a useful reminder that it's not the Jewish People or Judaism per se that Luke is so critical of, but the Jewish Religious Elite who have made Paul their enemy by trying to kill him. One more reason we should read and translate "Judean" rather than "Jew" when we read and translate these things.

But again, sailing West has become dangerous, now.

Warning:

So Paul warned them," we read.

"Men, I can see that our voyage is going to be disastrous and bring great loss to ship and cargo, and to our own lives also." 11 But the

centurion, instead of listening to what Paul said, followed the advice of the pilot and of the owner of the ship. 12 Since the harbor was unsuitable to winter in, the majority decided that we should sail on, hoping to reach Phoenix and winter there. This was a harbor in Crete, facing both southwest and northwest.

Julius likes Paul, or seems to. Paul's a citizen as he probably was. Except for the chains, they're peers. And Paul speaks to him and to those in charge of the ship: the captain, the owner. They think they should sail to Phoenix, and over-winter in a well-known, safe harbor. Paul wants to wait out winter where they are, in Fair Havens, even though it's not ideal. It's two against one, with Julius undecided; and he sides with the captain and owner, against Paul, and so: They resolve to sail on. The soldiers will do as their told, the sailors must acquiesce, too.

And that's where today's passage ends. Paul's right, and things go wrong and they're incredibly interesting, but...that's for next week.

So...

I had thought this whole scene would lend itself to a

conversation on Christian counsel, on listening to those who know what they're talking about. But, the truth is that it makes total sense for Julius to side with the captain and the owner. Paul may be a Roman Citizen, but he's no sailor, and he's a prisoner to boot. Julius, as we've seen, is kind to him, may like him, but...Paul isn't someone he should listen to on this. Soon, Paul will speak with authority that those on the ship can't ignore. But here...he's just a not-particularly powerful voice among more powerful voices.

We can talk about a question, at least. It's a leap, but that's okay. We'll call it a leap of faith, and then it'll feel reasonable.

Here's the question: How do we respond when people don't listen to us, but we know we are right? How do we respond when we know we are right, but people won't listen to us?

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Answering Christianly:

And a Christian answer to this could take all sorts of shapes, I think. It would be easy to frame a Christian

answer with any of the talking-related passages that the New Testament provides. We could talk about what it means to “speak the truth in love” to someone who won’t listen to us when we know we are right. We could talk about what it means to say “only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs,” and why we so often believe that what people need is to acknowledge we’re right. We could frame an answer by talking about what Jesus says the heart can give rise to, and how important it is to ensure our hearts are aligned with God. We could remember that if our response to someone who won’t listen to us is anything other than “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control,” then we are not being guided by the Spirit in our interactions with them.

Answering: What We So Often Want

And the truth is that we know what we so often want to do when someone won’t listen to us, right? I mean, we want to *log it*, so that when we’re proven right we can say “I told you so.” Or, as grown-ups who have learned along the way how unhelpful that can be, and have learned to protect ourselves a bit, we bite our tongues and say, to someone else nearby, “I told them so.” But a few of us are outliers, and are remarkably

patient. And it is remarkable how patiently we can wait for someone to fail when we believe they're going to because they didn't listen to us. I don't think that's the kind of patience that the Spirit bears as fruit in us, of course, but it's one we're good at.

Our first inclination isn't always to do as Christ would do, and sometimes our second or third isn't either, but we do know better. We know the right things to do. And we know James' reminder that "If anyone...knows the good they ought to do and doesn't do it, it is sin for them." Operating with the assumption that we want to do what's good, and we don't want to do what's bad, to sin, then I'd offer us this:

Don't Do Anything!

When someone doesn't listen to us, but we know we're right, we don't do anything. We just don't do anything.

Don't Do Anything: Interjection: Low Bar

And I know this is a low bar: I mean, honestly, this is a low bar. I'd rather invite us to, you know...make sure we're ready to help people when they need help even if they haven't listened to us, or make sure that we consider how often we ask God for help, but only in a

perfunctory, box-checking way, before we go off and do what we want. I'd rather ask us to consider what's "the most faithful, the most hopeful, the most loving thing" to do for another person, even if they won't listen to our wise, inerrant, hard-earned arguments. I'd rather we come to a place where we're not out to persuade anyone of our rightness and their own wrongness, where we always ask others before we offer up our opinions or solutions or hot takes. I'd rather that we mind our own faithfulness, and steward our own choices, and pray that God would lead others to ask us for our counsel, so we can in turn invite them to share with us what they see as the best choice in the situation they face.

Don't Do Anything:

But that's a hard-won place, that place where we choose to act with faith, hope, and love rather than wrap ourselves in the tragic joy of another person's failure, which being right demands. So, baby steps. We begin to do nothing. When we know we're right, but people won't listen to us, we do nothing. We don't badger, we don't condemn, we don't log it, so we can praise ourselves and remind them of their failure when they fail. We don't keep track of the times we've been right, or the times others have been wrong. We don't

mistake our good insight for our good character, a right call for righteousness. We just do nothing. We forget we've given an opinion to begin with. We cultivate a specific amnesia.

Because of course, to need affirmed that we are right, and others are wrong, is a sign that our identity, our sense of self, is not as secure in God as it needs to be, and too dependent on behaviors that we can't control, because they are other people's behaviors. And I don't have a long-life's-worth of experience, but it has seemed to me that the people whose opinions I want and value the most are those who are the most reticent to give me their opinions or advice in the first place. Ironically, they know something I don't, but what they know I don't want. What they know is that God can make good of anything, and following another person's advice before deeply considering our own convictions is to stifle maturity.

Conclusion:

And if we aren't able to choose what's most full of faith, of hope, and love for others, but instead, just want them to do what we think is right, then let's not speak at all. Because to speak is to condemn ourselves, not help others. People will always not

listen to us, even when we know we're right. They do this for the same reasons we don't listen to them. If we find ourselves offering advice, opinion, what we think is great wisdom, and it's just ignored, let's at least do nothing. And maybe we can build on that, pray for them, love them, wait to serve them, do all the good, right things we know are good and right, because the Spirit and some few saints have shown us they are.

But, this is just my advice, so... you know. Let's continue on.