

Preparing for the Storms of '07

Acts 27:13-14, 39-44

January 7, 2007

Toni and I have some very good friends who just retired to Florida. They moved during the first week of November into a lovely home in Port Charlotte, on the Gulf Coast. They had built a very successful business and were able to retire early, while still in their fifties. We were lucky to be able to spend a couple of weeks in their house last year, and it is a great place. The only thing I would change about their place would be the gators that occasionally crawl up into their backyard.

A couple of years ago, the eye of one of the Florida hurricanes (I can't remember which one) passed directly over their house, causing significant damage. When Toni and I were down there, we attended worship at their church - Evergreen United Methodist Church - which had suffered several million dollars in damage, and was still in the process of being cleaned up.

I made a unilateral decision a while back. It is very unusual for me to make a decision without first taking the counsel of my wife, but this time was different. I came home one day and announced that, when we retire, we are moving to someplace where we don't have to take a snow shovel. If it ends up that that place is Florida, we are going to go to somewhere in the center of the state away from both coasts, so that we don't have to evacuate every time a hurricane comes, like those folks on each coast. Surprisingly, my wife agreed.

The fact is that if you live in Florida, you have to be ready for storms, because they will come. They will come up the Atlantic Coast or the Gulf Coast, but they will come. Christians know a lot about storms because the first fledgling steps made by the missionary Paul, were taken in the midst of a storm.

After traveling the length and breadth of the eastern end of the Mediterranean Sea, founding churches and caring for new Christians wherever he went, Paul decided to spend one Pentecost in Jerusalem. He didn't know what would happen when he got there, but knew that there was trouble brewing and expected the worst.

When he arrived in Jerusalem, he checked in with James and the church there to report all that he had been doing. He told them about all of the successes that the new churches were having and the growth in the numbers of people believing in Jesus. James and the elders of the church were very pleased, but the Jews were still having a lot of trouble with the message. You see, Paul was resolute in his belief that people did not have to become a Jew before becoming a Christian. The Jews were incensed by that.

They dragged Paul outside of the Temple and did their best to kill him on the spot. He was rescued by the Roman soldiers garrisoned in the city who promptly put him under arrest for causing a riot. The Antonia Fortress sits right beside the Temple Mount and the soldiers took him into the fortress intending to torture him. As they tied him up ready to

be whipped, Paul asked the captain of the guard if he was in the habit of torturing Roman citizens without a trial. The captain was amazed that Paul was a Roman citizen and asked him how much he had paid for his citizenship, because he had paid a huge sum of money for his. But Paul said that he had paid nothing because he was a citizen from birth. Saved from torture because of his citizenship, Paul was taken the next day before the Jewish Council.

Before they could get him before the Council, the soldiers heard of a plot to kill Paul, so they whisked him away to the city of Caesarea on the coast until he could have a hearing before the governor. He spent the next two years under house arrest in that city until a new governor came into power. He then appealed for his right as a Roman citizen to be tried in Rome by the Emperor.

So the beginning in the 27th chapter of Acts, we find the story of his journey from Israel to Rome. Their ship runs north along the coast of what is modern day Jordan until they get to the southern coast of what is now Turkey. But it was now late autumn, a dangerous time to be sailing. Paul warned them that they shouldn't leave port, but the sailors wouldn't listen. After all, he was just a preacher. What did he know about the sea?

A fierce storm came up and battered the tiny ship for fourteen days. The crew tried everything they could think of to get to land, but they couldn't make headway at all. Paul, at one point said, "I told you so. You should have listened to me" (27:21).

Paul told them that an angel of God had told him that they were not going to die, but were going to survive the storm. Then Paul did something amazing. He said, "Let's eat breakfast." And he laid out the bread which is clearly more than just a meal. It was a holy meal, communion, the Lord's Supper.

The ship finally ran aground just off the coast of Malta. They jumped into the water, grabbed hold of anything that would float, and made it safely to shore.

As we stand on the cusp of a new year, the reality that faces us is that storms will come and go. Whether or not we face another Andrew or Katrina or Hugo or Camille, we will still have to find a way to walk through the storms of human life. Maybe the storm will be in the form of an unwelcome medical diagnosis. Perhaps it will be seen in the crumbling of relationships. It could be that an addiction reaches up and grabs you by the collar. Maybe someone in the church will say something to offend. It is within the realm of possibility that a storm may arise in your relationship with God. What was once alive and vibrant may shatter and become dry as dust. Something completely unforeseen could rise up and cause havoc in your life. It happens. Storms come. That is life. Before we go any farther, let's acknowledge that we will be very lucky people if the year 2007 doesn't bring us incredible challenges from time to time.

So what do we do? How do we get prepared? Can we storm-proof our life before the tempest hits?

First off, I think that it just makes sense to develop a relationship with Jesus while the sun is warm and the breeze is still gentle. Paul knew Jesus on an intimate basis before he ever set foot on that doomed ship.

I had a great-Aunt, Osie. She was always my favorite aunt. When I was a kid, she was almost an institution up in Auburn. Everybody knew her and loved her. I am told that you could address a letter to “Osie, Auburn, Indiana” and she would get it.

Every Christmas, we would gather at our house to exchange presents. Osie and her husband Ed would always be there. Later in the evening, after the food had been put away and the wrapping paper cleaned up, we would play euchre. She and I would always team up against my dad and grandmother. I don’t remember who won most often, but we had a great time. She has been gone for twenty or twenty-five years now, but I still miss these annual card games.

I remember visiting her just a few days before she died. Uncle Ed had been gone for a few years. She was old and frail and ready to go. I remember sitting down beside her bed, taking her hand, and asking, “How’s it going?” She told me that it was just about over. Her time to die was coming closer and closer. But she said that it was alright. She told me how she knew and loved Jesus. She wasn’t afraid. She was ready. She told me that she knew that Jesus, who had been with her for her whole life, wouldn’t desert her now.

She had gone through a life that was pretty tough at times, yet she survived and flourished because she knew Jesus. Before the winds got bad, she had developed a relationship with Jesus and so weathered those storms with courage and grace.

So what can you do to prepare for the storms of this coming year? First of all, make sure that you have a relationship with Jesus before times get tough. Secondly, watch the course you take. We all know, or we should know by now, that there are some storms that can’t be avoided. They come at us with no warning and with no time for preparation. But there are some storms that are of our own making. Sometimes we just do foolish things, steer a foolish course, and deliberately sail into threatening seas.

On occasion, our kids have done some unwise things. When they have then come to us, we have always tried to be supportive without rescuing them. We have always believed that people need to live with the consequences of their actions. We don’t think that they will grow and mature unless they learn from their mistakes.

Years ago, I had coffee with a friend who had retired from active ministry after 41 years. As we sat in the booth down at Bob Evans, he told me that the one thing he regretted about his ministry was that he had put everything into it, to the exclusion of his family. He told me that he really regretted neglecting his kids. He had become successful, if we define success by large pulpits and even larger salaries. But his family life had paid the price. He said that he knew that what he was doing wasn’t healthy for his family, but he had gone ahead and done it anyway.

Sometimes we get warnings that we are headed for trouble. The truly wise among us will listen before we head into a storm. That goes for all parts of your life. Where is your life leading you? Is it leading to health or is it leading to danger?

Third, as you make your way through your life, make sure that you have good friends along for the trip. Let me speak for a minute out of my experience as an ordained clergy person. There are 100,000 pastors in the United States (20%) who are in advanced stages of burnout. There are another 100,000 who are teetering on the edge. I have seen the research and I know that a statistically significant number of these pastors report that they have no close friends.

Everybody, regardless of occupation or stage in life, needs someone to be a real friend. A real friend is one who will challenge you, ask questions, hold you accountable, laugh with you, cry with you, rejoice with you, and love you in spite of yourself.

Search the New Testament and you don't find any such thing as solitary Christianity. When Jesus sent out the 70 in the tenth chapter of Luke, he sent them out in pairs. When they finished their work, they all came back together in one large group. I imagine that it was quite a party. We all need friends, people with whom we can be completely honest, who we can trust, and who will go the distance for us. You may be able to weather the storms alone, but why would you want to do that when you could have a friend along for the trip?

Fourth, I think that we all need to remember that there is more to life than our own happiness. The Christian life is less about us and more about God. It is about becoming holy. You become holy by getting rid of all of the extra stuff in your life that keeps you from God.

Earlier in the fall, I raked leaves out of the backyard and made a pile on the driveway (actually it was the church parking lot), expecting to put them into bags and get rid of them. It was dark by the time I got finished raking, so I went inside saying that I would take care of them the next day. But it rained for a couple of days. I told myself that I needed to give the leaves a couple of days to dry out, and then I would pick them up. But for the next several days, I was late getting home for dinner, or I had a meeting in the evening, and the leaves didn't get picked up. And then it rained again. That pattern has been going on all fall and winter. The pile of leaves is still there.

Every time I see that pile of leaves, it is either dark, or raining. I tell myself that I have to get them before it snows. It's getting to the point that I can't think about too much else, but now that pile of leaves is wet, and packed down, and really nasty. The cleanup, whenever I finally get around to it, will be hard.

It is like that in our spiritual lives. In II Corinthians 5:17, Paul talks about people becoming new creatures in Christ. But it is so hard to become new when there is a lot of stuff clogging up our lives and taking up our energy. We need to get rid of the stuff that

keeps us from Jesus so that we can focus our energy on him. That way, we can be ready when the storms come.

The issue for us is not “if” storms come in 2007. The issue is “when” the storms come. The final thing to remember is that the tomb is empty. Jesus is risen. Death is defeated. The grave could not hold him. Evil could not win. Jesus turned the cross from a symbol of defeat to a sign of victory.

One of the most powerful verses in the New Testament for me comes from the 8th chapter of Romans. Paul writes, “I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (38-39).

So when the storms come remember: develop a relationship with Jesus while the sun shines, watch the course you take, make sure you have good friends, remember that life is less about us and more about God, and never forget that Christ is stronger than any storm that will ever come our way.

Just as Paul broke bread with the sailors on his ship, we now break bread as a means of grace. Through the Sacrament, Christ comes fully alive in our midst and we are assured of his eternal presence.