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The Third Sunday after Pentecost

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God Preserves Us in Times of Trouble

The central truth of the Bible is that God saves the world from the guilt of sin, the threat of hell, and the power of Satan. God cares about our spiritual status, but he also cares about our physical lives, our bodies and minds, our safe times and our troubled time. In his own way and his own time, God keeps us safe in dangerous and difficult situations. In the Gospel, Jesus stilled a sudden storm and calmed the fears of his followers. He calms our fears, too.

First Reading

Job 38:1-11

The Lord's great power controls the universe.

Second Reading

Acts 27:13-26

The Lord promises his protection to Paul and his comrades.

Gospel

Mark 4:35-41

Jesus stilled the storm and calmed his disciples' fears.

Sermon

Acts 27:13-26

Introduction: Oliver Wendall Holmes said it first and then Johnny Cash sang about it: "You're shinin' your light and shine it you should, but you're so heavenly minded that you're no earthly good." I might debate the point with either of them, but I get why Holmes said it and why Cash sang it. Sometimes preachers spend so much time talking about sin and salvation that we forget to talk about troubles and tragedies. It seems like some preachers are more interested in getting people to heaven than getting them through the day.

I don't doubt for a minute that Christians understand what Jesus has done for them. You know that Jesus has redeemed you from the punishment of sin and promised you an eternal home. We all say: Thank God for that. But maybe, just maybe, the people in the pew are a little more earthly-minded than the preacher is. Maybe they're a little more practical. They think about troubles at work and the status of their savings. They worry about people who run stoplights and sharp pains they've never felt before. They have concerns about aging parents and precious grandchildren. And if the preacher is honest, so does he. The Gospel for today told us that Jesus preached about the kingdom of heaven all day long, and his disciples heard every word and were glad they did. But when they crossed the Sea of Galilee and a bad storm came up, they became pretty earthly minded: **Teacher, don't you care if we drown?**

Do you remember how Jesus responded? He said to them, **Do you still have no faith?** He wanted his disciples to figure this out on their own. If he could heal sick people and cure demon-possessed people, didn't it make sense he could save them from drowning? If Jesus cared enough for us to die for us and prepare a place in heaven for us, doesn't it seem that he cares enough for us now to keep us safe on earth? St. Paul had this all figured out when he wrote to the Christians in Rome: **He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?**

Paul could make that point and he believed that point because he had seen Jesus at work in his own life. The Second Reading for today, from Acts chapter 27, tells us about a bigger storm than the disciples experienced on a bigger sea than the Sea of Galilee. Paul was the disciple in the boat. Paul helps us learn how to deal with what happens down here on earth, especially when our lives take a turn for the worse and when our ship is ready to sink. He makes the point that

When the Rains Fall and the Winds Howl

Anticipate the disaster

Rely on the promise

1. We all know St. Paul. In his younger days he was Saul. He was very heavenly minded, almost fanatical in his Jewish faith. But he was also interested in his earthly good. He was a businessman, a tentmaker, and lived in Tarsus, a major metropolitan area. He was a Roman citizen and traveled across the Mediterranean. He knew ship travel. Been there; done that. Jesus called him to be the missionary to the Gentiles. That got him all over the world and it also got him into all kinds of trouble with the Jews. For years, the Jewish leaders had tried to get rid of him. The local courts knew he was innocent but lacked the courage to vindicate him. Finally, he appealed to be tried before the imperial court in Rome. And that's where this story begins—on a ship headed for Rome. He's not alone. A Roman centurion named Julius is basically in charge of him and two friends, Aristarchus and Luke, travel with him. Eventually, Luke told the story.

It was fall and the Mediterranean was already getting nasty. They started out in a small ship designed for stops along the coast but then boarded a large ship carrying grain from Egypt to Rome—a seafaring ship with a passenger list of 276 people. They were behind schedule because of the weather and needed to make progress so they set sail. Paul warned them; he knew what the Mediterranean could do at this time of the year. Nobody paid any attention. **When a gentle south wind began to blow, they saw their opportunity; so they weighed anchor and sailed along the shore of Crete.** And then disaster: **Before very long, a wind of hurricane force, called the Northeaster, swept down from the island.** The ship was caught in the storm. The crew tried everything to keep it afloat; Luke supplies the details I'm not going to repeat. But nothing worked. The ship was taking what Luke calls a **violent battering**. Nothing worked. The food was gone; Luke writes: **When neither sun nor stars appeared for many days and the storm continued raging, we finally gave up all hope of being saved.**

You might think the Lord Jesus could have done better—I mean this was St. Paul, the missionary to the Gentiles! But the Lord doesn't set aside the laws of nature just because Christians live in the middle of it. The sun keeps shining even when it gets really hot, right? The Lord knows when tornadoes strike but doesn't always change their path. He knows when there's a drought but doesn't always send rain. He knows the drunk is running a red light, he knows a child is playing with a gun, he knows when grandma misses a step on the stairs. He doesn't stop sick people from getting sicker or old people from getting older. God doesn't always stop the action of life as though life is a computer screen where you can click on pause. He doesn't always stop the bad decisions people make or even the bad decisions we make. In today's Gospel Jesus stilled a storm, but he doesn't always do that. Just like with Paul, the Lord sometimes allows the storm to rage. **So when the rains fall and the winds howl, we can anticipate the disaster.**

2. St. Paul doesn't seem like a happy camper in all this. He issues what sounds like an "I told you so." **You should have taken my advice not to sail from Crete; then you would have spared yourselves this damage and loss.** But Paul wasn't being a jerk. He was getting the crews attention and he got it. This is what he had to say: **I urge you to keep up your courage, because not one of you will be lost; only the ship will be destroyed.** Here they are in the middle of the ocean with a hurricane blowing them toward a shore full of rocks and rain blasting in their faces and everybody on board convinced he is going to die and Paul says **Keep up your courage.** Say that to a friend in the last stages of cancer or to a wife whose husband has left her or to employees whose company has closed. People would think you're heartless or crazy. But Paul had a reason for what he said: **Last night an angel of the God to whom I belong 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.** God had a plan for Paul and no hurricane was going to change it. The ship crashed, sure enough. But in God's plan Paul survived and so did everyone else. Luke reports at the end of this episode that **everyone reached land safely.**

There's an old poem that goes like this:

God hath not promised skies always blue,
Flower-strewn pathways all our lives through;
God hath not promised sun without rain,
Joy without sorrow, peace without pain.
But God hath promised strength for the day,
Rest for the labor, light for the way,
Grace for the trials, help from above,
Unfailing sympathy, undying love.

I can't quote every passage in the Bible that speaks this truth. Jesus warned us that life would be filled with troubles and tragedies, but he also said, **I will be with you always even to the end of the age.** Isaiah quoted the Lord: **Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.** The Lord Jesus loved us so much that he was willing to carry our sins to the cross and save us from the ravages of Satan and hell. He is not about to leave us now. No matter where we go or what we do, Jesus is always there. Like with Paul, the ship sometimes crashes and the jail cell sometimes looms. Being a Christian doesn't spare us from the storms and trials of life. But being a Christian does assure us that Jesus will never leave us or forsake us. **So when the rains fall and the winds howl, we can rely on the promises.**

It's good for us to be earthly minded sometimes. We think about life down here every day and we should. But we can be sure that being heavenly minded and earthly minded are not disconnected for us. At the end of his life Paul looked back and he looked ahead and he saw earth and heaven connected. **The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack,** he wrote, **and will bring me safely to his heavenly kingdom.** Please, dear Jesus, give us that kind of faith. Amen.