

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
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Encouragement Served Here

Acts 27:27-44

"We put out to sea" (27:2). If you're the kind of person who prefers solid ground and stable footing, those aren't the words you want to hear. They're words of risk, adventure, and danger. "We put out to sea." That's the way Luke describes the beginning of the stormy voyage we witness in this morning's text from the book of Acts. By the time we come into Luke's narrative, this turbulent journey is two weeks old. But now, the crew senses that land is finally approaching. On the one hand, land means safety and security. But on the other hand, land means new and different types of threats and risks. After all, there's a chance that the boat could be smashed against the rocks. So all things considered, at this point, the best thing to do is drop anchor and wait and pray, especially for daylight.

But just in case prayer isn't enough, some of those on board have an alternate plan for surviving. Acting as if they're lowering more anchors, they're actually lowering the lifeboat, hoping to escape. That's when Paul steps in and exposes their attempt to jump ship. He tells the centurion in charge of the ship's prisoners that in order for God's promise and purpose to be fulfilled, everyone has to remain on board. The centurion cooperates by commanding the soldiers to release the lifeboat, empty.

According to Luke, the lifeboat isn't the only empty thing in this story. By this point in the journey, there are also plenty of empty stomachs. What with the constant stress and anxiety of the voyage, no one has thought much about eating. But the fact is, if they want to have enough strength to make one last push to shore, and reach their final deliverance, everyone needs to have a meal. That's where Paul once again comes through. The way Luke puts it, Paul "took some bread and gave thanks to God in front of them all. Then he broke it and began to eat" (v. 35).

This choice of words sounds familiar, doesn't it? That's because it's the language of the Lord's Supper. Taking bread, giving thanks, breaking it, eating it. This is the rhythm and terminology of our sacred meal, the meal through which we remember God's saving power in the death of Jesus Christ. Now that doesn't mean that as the sun began to rise, Paul reached into his backpack and pulled out a handful of prepackaged juice and wafer sets, enough for everybody on board. But it does mean that Paul used this experience as an opportunity to eat with thankfulness for the Lord's presence and with confidence in the Lord's power to rescue the perishing. In other words, this meal at sea pointed to Christ's death and what it means for those whose faith is in him.

Remember that though all eyes are on Paul, he wants to make sure that all eyes are ultimately on Jesus. Granted, Paul the prisoner has already attracted a lot of attention during the voyage. He knows when to sail. He knows what will happen. He knows how to revive the passengers. He knows what the crew is up to. But most of all, he knows what God is up to. And in the midst of raging storms and life-threatening circumstances, Paul is hard at work taking the spotlight that's placed on him and turning it toward the Lord. That's because Paul knows that if this journey is going to end in life and not death, it will be by God's provision, God's purpose, and God's power.

By focusing attention on Christ, Paul gives everyone on the ship more than just a meal. Most of all, he serves up a generous portion of encouragement. "They were all encouraged," says Luke, "and ate some food themselves" (v. 36). This isn't the first time in the book of Acts where Luke tells us that the presence of a Christian messenger brought encouragement. Early in the story, Luke introduces us to the Christian missionary Barnabas, "Son of Encouragement" (4:36). His very name tells us that he was known primarily as "one who encourages or exhorts." Then, as we go further into Luke's narrative of the early church, we encounter other events, experiences, and Christian gatherings where prominent leaders, fellow believers in general, or even the Holy Spirit, are described as encouraging the community of Jesus' followers.

Taken together, all these episodes tell us that encouragement was woven into the very fabric of the early church. Words and acts of encouragement weren't just sprinkled sporadically into the church in order to give it a momentary boost. No, encouragement was a steady, consistent element in the church's life and mission. It was fundamental to the church's perseverance, proclamation, and propagation.

The Greek term often translated in the New Testament as "encourage" has the root sense of "to call to one's side" or "to come alongside" someone in order to strengthen them and exhort them. Sometimes we think of encouragement as a matter saying nice things to others to help them feel better about themselves or to comfort them in their sorrow. We frequently define encouragement as the things we do to remind one another of God's presence and purposes. William Arthur Ward, who was known for his inspirational maxims, once wrote, "Flatter me, and I may not believe you. Criticize me, and I may not like you. Ignore me, and I may not forgive you. Encourage me, and I will not forget you." Where would any of us be without those who come to us as messengers of encouragement? What would we do if it weren't for people who bring us reassurance of God's goodness, faithfulness, and love?

Though there's some truth in this way of understanding encouragement, the practice of encouragement in the Scriptures, particularly the book of Acts, goes much deeper. In the context of the early church, encouragement had more to do with admonishing, exhorting, and strengthening believers, not simply for their own personal comfort and the community's internal cohesion, but for their work of promoting the gospel in the world.

There's a beautiful tapestry in England called the Bayeux Tapestry. It records the events from a great campaign when the Norman armies successfully invaded England. One of its scenes depicts a column of Norman soldiers on horseback. They're followed by the bishop of Bayeux, who is busy poking the last man with a large stick. The caption to this scene reads: "Bishop Odo comforts the soldiers."¹ Not necessarily the kind of image that comes to mind when we think about comfort and encouragement. But sometimes, that's what being encouraged means. It means the Holy Spirit, urging us on to greater things. It means the Spirit calling forth renewed loyalty to the reconciling, restoring work of God in the world.

In one sense, encouragement means being the church gathered, like we are here today. We need to assemble on a regular basis for mutual refreshment and renewal in Christ. Several years ago, the world watched as three gray whales, icebound off Point Barrow, Alaska, floated battered and bloody, gasping for breath at a hole in the ice. Their only hope was to be transported five miles past the ice pack to open sea. Figuring out how to transport them was the challenge. Eventually, rescuers began cutting a string of breathing holes about twenty yards apart in the six-inch-thick ice. For eight days they coaxed the whales from one hole to the next, mile after mile. Along the way, one of the trio vanished and was presumed dead. But finally, with the help of Russian icebreakers, the remaining two whales swam to freedom. When it comes to mutual encouragement, think of

congregational worship as a string of breathing holes that the Lord provides us. Weary from the struggles of life and labor for the kingdom, we assemble in church and rise for air. This gathering is a place where we can breathe again, where we can be encouraged, loved, and empowered until that day when the Lord sees us through to our destination in the fullness of his eternal reign.²

But in another sense, encouragement means being the church scattered, the church sent forth in the power of the Spirit, not to draw attention to ourselves but to draw attention to Christ. Day in and day out, you and I are called to break the bread of the gospel and distribute it to others who are with us in the life of this stormy world.

In 2009 there was an article in the *Chicago Tribune* that told the story of a Christian cook who worked at Children's Memorial Hospital. Her name was Bettye Tucker. One person summarized the article this way:

She has been doing her job for 43 years—28 of them on the night shift. She sees a steady stream of parents in her job, many of them frightened and weary. On one particular night around the time the article was written, Miss Bettye (as she is referred to by all who know her) served food to a mother whose three-year-old fell out of a second story window that morning, another mother whose seventeen-year-old was battling a rare form of leukemia, and a third mother whose eighteen-year-old had endured seven hours of brain surgery. Their stories break the heart of Miss Bettye, and—as one coworker interviewed for the article says—“that's why she feeds every last one of them as if they had walked right into the 'too-small' kitchen of [the] South Side brick bungalow [where she lives].” A member of the hospital's housekeeping crew adds this about Miss Bettye: “You need someone to bring you life, and she brings it in the middle of the night.”

A picture of Miss Bettye that accompanied the article shows a woman with a beautiful smile. It's hard to imagine how much that smile would mean to a suffering parent or child. She says, “When I ask, ‘How you doin’ today?’ and they say it's not a good day, I say, ‘Don't lose hope.’ When the nurses tell me it's a bad night, I say, ‘I understand it's a bad night. But guess what? I am here for you. I'm going to get you through the night.’”

Another picture shows Bettye sitting down, head bowed, over a meal. “I'm a praying lady,” she says in the article. “I pray every night, for every room and every person in the hospital. I start with the basement, and I go up, floor by floor, room by room. I pray for the children, I pray for the families, I pray for the nurses and the doctors. ... I say, every night while I'm driving in on the expressway, ‘Oh, Lord, I don't know what I'll face tonight, but I pray you'll guide me through.’”

The reporter behind the article, Barbara Mahany, offers these words about Miss Bettye: “Just might be, that divine helping on the side is the most essential item on Miss Bettye's menu. The one she stirs in every broth, and every whisper. The ingredient that makes her the perpetual light shining in the all-night kitchen.”³

As I said, the course of your daily life brings you into engagement with others who need a generous serving of gospel encouragement. These are folks who've dropped every anchor they can and said every prayer they can say. From what they can see, no lifeboats are available. They're on the verge of abandoning all hope. But you are on board with them, and you know where there's an abundant supply of divine promise, saving power, and eternal purpose, right there in the good news of Jesus' death and resurrection. So you take what has helped you survive, what has brought you this far, what provides you with strength, what gives you indestructible hope, and you feed yourself and them with the bread of the gospel, so that they too can be nourished and pointed in the direction of life.

Being that kind of person, and living that kind of life, takes courage, especially in an atmosphere where so many people are full of so much fear, anxiety, and uncertainty about

where their lives are headed, where their families and communities are headed, where our nation is headed, and where the world is headed. Will the dark clouds of gun violence continue to gather and threaten our sense of security? Will the thunder of political name calling keep growing louder and louder? Will the winds of racial division and ethnic strife become even more fierce? Will the waves of international strife and warfare continue to rise? Will the relentless rains of disease, economic inequality, and environmental decline completely drown us? Will all these things, and a multitude of other forces, just keep pounding and pounding and pounding until this great ship of humanity breaks completely apart?

It's no wonder that in a world like that, we need a gathering like this, where we can come together and be encouraged, which means, as the word itself indicates, filled with courage. In fact, in the segment of the story right before today's Scripture passage, Paul urged those on the ship to "keep up your courage" (27:23, 25). That's the call issued to us every Sunday, and all other times when we gather for Christian worship and fellowship. Keep up your courage. Be filled with courage. Not the kind of courage that comes from looking within ourselves for the power to overcome the storm. Rather, the kind of courage that's firmly anchored in what God has already done for us, and for the world, through Jesus Christ. I like the way that one person has put it when he says that the reason Paul could be a source of encouragement in the fury of the storm was because his strength came from beyond the storm.⁴ Paul was convinced that God's gracious, redeeming purposes couldn't be thwarted.

With that kind of faith as your own rudder, keep up your courage. Don't be reluctant to put out to sea each day, with confidence in the sovereignty of God and reliance on his fidelity to his word. With gratitude and generosity, take the bread of the gospel, and through your words and deeds, break it and distribute it to others, so that they too can be strengthened and encouraged.

¹ Alister McGrath, *"I Believe": Exploring the Apostles' Creed* (Downer's Grove: InterVarsity, 1997) 81.

² *Illustrations for Preaching and Teaching: From Leadership Journal*, ed. Craig Brian Larson (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993) 34.

³ Barbara Mahany, "Cooking Up Compassion." *Chicago Tribune* (September 20, 2009), section 6.

⁴ William J. Larkin, Jr. *Acts*. IVPNTC 5 (Downer's Grove: IVP Academic, 1995) 373.