

1 We're wrapping up our journey through the book of Acts today, but that doesn't mean that we're setting aside all that we've learned about how crucial the Holy Spirit is for our life together as the church and our lives apart as individuals, seeking to act out the Good News of God's forgiving love in this world. We've ended our month-long focus on missions near and far, but that doesn't mean we're setting aside our passion and purpose of being the change this world needs through practical and relational ministry with those who are hurting. If anything, my prayer is that we would receive a fresh anointing of the Holy Spirit, a recommissioning of our role as sacred agents for Jesus, sharing the Good News of Jesus in deed and word, out loud for the world to see and hear.

2 How many of you have ever been on a cruise on one of those huge cruise ships that holds thousands of people? I've never been, but I've heard from some of you that even on one of these big ships you can get seasick. I can't even handle riding in the front passenger seat of a car, so I haven't been especially keen to get on a cruise ship. Paul's journey to Rome via Malta in Acts 27 and 28 was nothing like a trip aboard the Royal Caribbean's Symphony of the Seas, the world's largest cruise ship that includes 22 restaurants, 42 bars, robotic bar tenders, and a nine-story zip line.¹ Instead of three 25,000 Horsepower engines, Paul's ship relied on the wind in its sails or the working of oars. Instead of almost 7,000 passengers, Paul's ship carried 276.² Instead of a seven-day cruise, Paul's voyage lasted months. The storm alone lasted 14 days. Under the best of conditions, Paul's ship would have been crowded with crew, cargo, and passengers- some of the soldiers and prisoners. In a raging storm, it would have been unimaginable chaos and misery. At this point in the story, we're remembering what God said to Ananias back in Acts 9: "Go, for Saul is my chosen instrument to take my message to the Gentiles and to kings, as well as to the people of Israel. And I will show him how much he must suffer for my name's sake."³ Was Paul, who had already been stoned, beaten with rods, and imprisoned multiple times, to finally die in what was the ancient equivalent of a routine traffic accident? No, God provided for the safety of

¹ <https://www.businessinsider.com/royal-caribbean-debuts-worlds-largest-cruise-ship-photos-2018-4>

² Acts 27:37

³ Acts 9:15-16, NLT (2nd Ed.)

Paul and all the passengers, because God's plan to bring the Gospel to Rome required that Paul make it there. But washed up on the shores of the Island of Malta, Paul had even more adversity to face. Let's rejoin the castaways now, picking up at the beginning of Acts 28.

{Read Acts 28:1-10 (NLT)}.

3 Say hello to Andrew Hamblin, the pastor of Tabernacle Church in Tennessee.⁴ Those who practice snake handling in worship are attempting to demonstrate what Jesus said in the Gospel of Mark before his ascension: "These miraculous signs will accompany those who believe: They will cast out demons in my name, and they will speak in new languages. They will be able to handle snakes with safety, and if they drink anything poisonous, it won't hurt them. They will be able to place their hands on the sick, and they will be healed."⁵ I'd say it's a pretty far stretch to go from what Jesus said here to the ritualization of snake handling in worship. At the very least, there's that old commandment that Jesus also reminded us of in the Gospel of Matthew as he confronted Satan: "The Scriptures also say, 'You must not test the Lord your God.' "⁶ And yet, Paul did manifest many of these miraculous signs, and his encounter with the poisonous snake at the campfire on the beach was surely seen by the natives of Malta as a sign of divine presence.

Has anyone here been bitten by a snake, either venomous or otherwise? I'm sure it's something you'd never forget. Has anyone here ever been shipwrecked? The closest I've come to that calamity is swamping my canoe in the middle of a large lake in the Boundary Waters Canoe Area in late October. Fortunately, there were no poisonous snakes lurking about as we gathered wood to make a fire. For the most part, shipwrecks and snakes don't play a dominant role in the obstacles and travails we're most afraid of today. If not those, then what?

4 Chapman University has been conducting a now annual survey of the things Americans most fear.⁷ Their most recent survey results from last fall reveal what's taken the place of shipwrecks and snakes. The top fear reported by 74% of respondents was corruption

⁴ https://www.mysanantonio.com/news/local_news/article/Snake-handlers-grasp-faith-s-power-3620283.php

⁵ Mark 16:17-18, NLT (2nd Ed.)

⁶ Matthew 4:7, Ibid

⁷ <http://www.krbe.com/2017/10/14/most-terrifying-thing-to-americans-2017/>

of government officials, with the remaining fears all falling around the 50% mark: Fears around healthcare and medical bills, not having enough money for retirement, water and air pollution, global warming, and war, especially with North Korea. I think we could easily add to that list the fear of aging, fear of cancer, fear of dying, and increasingly, the fear of being alone. For the most part, these are not irrational fears, and I doubt that any of us, on this side of eternity, will ever be perfectly without fear. Sometimes fear is an adaptive response, a gift from God that prompts us to act or refrain from taking action that would harm us or others. On the other hand, oftentimes our responses to our fears are irrational, leading us to allow our fear to override the things we know to be true about who we are, whose we are, and why we're here.

What are the things that you are most afraid of? You can be honest to yourself about this, because I won't ask you to share that with each other. Instead, think about the things you're most afraid of, and simply name them in your heart before God. Do you have something? Now think about how those fears shape your behavior, preventing you from being a sacred agent for Jesus in this world. Does your fear of strangers prevent you from introducing yourself to a new neighbor? Does your fear of not having enough money prevent you from generously sharing with others? Like Paul before us, we need to learn to shake off the shipwrecks and the snakes and keeping moving forward on our mission of Acting out God's love, both near and far, and ultimately to the very ends of the earth.

5 Sometimes it's not fear that bogs us down in our mission for Christ, but simply the myriad disappointments of life. We experience disappointment in direct proportion to the ratio of our expectations to reality. In other words, the higher our expectations are relative to reality as we experience it, the bigger our disappointment. If you've ever dreamed or made a plan, then you've been disappointed. If you've ever loved or trusted another person, you've been disappointed. Disappointments are a fact of life and a natural consequence of taking risks, without which we'd never learn or grow, and we'd never be able to follow in the footsteps of Jesus, who risked everything in order that we might live the abundant life that comes through the forgiving love of God.

Think about a disappointment in your life, either something recent or something from long ago. Maybe it involves your job or a class in school. Maybe it's a friendship that's been

strained. Maybe it's a broken relationship or the death of a loved one. Sometimes our disappointments come because we have unrealistic expectations. But often our disappointments simply arise from the intrusion of reality, from the fact that we are imperfect people, living with other imperfect people, living in an imperfect world. Like our fears, our response to disappointments can stall us out, keep us from living the lives of sacrificial love that Christ calls us to. Have you found a way to shake off the shipwreck of disappointments? You don't have to be a Pollyanna, someone who's excessively optimistic and refuses to acknowledge the negative. Avoidance isn't a sound psychological principle, so it's a good idea to start by simply naming what your disappointment is. Going to God with a complaint or a lament is something God can handle, and since God can see into your heart anyway, you might as well be honest.

But don't stop there. Getting stuck in our disappointments is like returning to the scene of a car accident, day after day, repeating the trauma of the crash instead of meeting each new day that God gives us. I'm not saying that grief is wrong, but I am saying that our identity goes beyond our grief. That's why we need God's word and each other, for encouragement and a view of the big picture. That's why we need the discipline of gratitude, so we're reminded of all that's right with the world, even when what's right seems to be more abundant in the lives of others than our own. And that's why we need worship, to be reminded that life isn't all about us after all. When we worship together we remember that we worship an infinitely powerful God who walks with us through the valleys and celebrates with us on the mountaintops.

6 Did everything work out well for Paul in the end? We never really learn Paul's ultimate fate, only that he did eventually make it to Rome and that while there he was allowed to preach the Gospel while under house arrest. Church tradition is that he was eventually beheaded by Emperor Nero. Does that mean Paul's life and mission were a failure? Hardly! Paul was powerfully used by God to bring the Gospel in both word and example to many, including the most powerful and influential citizens of Rome. Somehow, by God's strength and Spirit, Paul persevered through an incredible series of obstacles, any one of which might have given him reason to second guess his decision to follow Jesus. But he didn't. He shook off the shipwrecks and snakes and kept following Jesus, one day at a

time, even to his death. We can't all be Paul, but we can find a way forward. Your challenge this week is to identify and shake off one shipwreck that's marooned you, one snake of disappointment that's bitten you, so you can rejoin our mission of acting out the Gospel of love in this world, going in a spirit of hope and even joy.



Buffalo United Methodist Church

...serving people for Jesus Christ so that we all may know joy!



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