



THE FIRST WORD

FROM FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF BONITA SPRINGS

Shipwrecked

SERMON BY REV. BRAD ROGERS ■ JULY 22, 2018

According to F. F. Bruce, one of my favorite New Testament scholars, “Life has often been compared to a voyage across a stormy sea.” To be honest, sometimes life isn’t just a voyage across the stormy sea but a bit like being *Shipwrecked*, which was the theme of our Vacation Bible School this year. Over the course of two weeks, our 90 students pretended that they were *Shipwrecked* on a deserted island. They had to learn that when they experienced loneliness, when they experienced worry, when they struggled, when they experienced sin, and when they felt powerless, they could place their trust in Jesus, who would rescue them from any circumstance.

About ten days before the first week of VBS, I thought that maybe God was providing my family a perfectly timed sermon illustration. My family and I had gone to Jensen’s Marina on Captiva Island where we hopped on a boat destined for Cayo Costa. Lauren and her family were going to do some shelling and I was going to play on the beach with the kids. It was about 8:30 in the morning when we got the boat headed north into the Pine Island Sound when, out to the west, we saw some pink clouds on the horizon. The pink clouds on the horizon were building and getting darker, so we started stowing away anything that wasn’t water resistant and putting cell phones in plastic bags under seats. As the clouds were blooming around us, our casual conversation turned to what the plan ought to be. Some were advocating that we keep going, as we were all wearing swimsuits and it wouldn’t matter if we got a little wet.

Some said there was another marina just to the west where we could dock and wait out the storm. A few folks were saying that we should just head back and call it a day because it was certainly getting dark.

I had not rented the boat. I was just a guest on the boat, which made me feel a bit powerless because I really didn't have the decision-making power—I had no cash in the game. So, I just tried to console the children, saying, "We may get a little bit wet, but it's not that big of a deal."

Then all of a sudden, everyone on the boat looked to the west at the same time, and there in the darkest part of the storm, was a waterspout. We began to get a sense that this was not going to be just a Southwest Florida afternoon rain shower. This was going to be an interesting storm, perhaps a dangerous one. At that point, the anxiety onboard went overboard!

Now I'm a pastor on a boat, and all the stories in the Scriptures where people are in stormy seas started flowing into my mind. I thought about Noah: 40 days and 40 nights in the storm at sea. I thought about Jonah, who gets thrown overboard, I thought about Jesus on the Sea of Galilee with His disciples. Remember, He was asleep in the stern and a ferocious squall suddenly came upon them and the disciples panicked and woke Jesus. For years I'd read that story and thought the disciples had overreacted, but now here we were in a boat heading toward a storm. The closer we got to it, the greater our anxiety. I began to ask myself, "Can we swim to shore from here? Where are the extra life preservers?"

When you start asking those questions on the open sea with a storm bearing in on you, there's a sense of hopelessness. You are looking at the power that you have, which is not much in comparison to the great power of the storm in the sea. That feeling of hopelessness really starts to settle.

It is in these very dangerous moments that *hope* is all the more important, but also all the more elusive. We need to have a firm *grounding* of hope in the midst of life and death situations; otherwise, we are going to be thrown around and tossed about on the seas just like a boat. Sometimes the storms that we experience in life aren't small, they are pretty big, and we need hope to guide us through.

In scary times like this, hope becomes even more necessary—a rightly placed hope, at that. While we're being tossed by the waves, feeling out of control and powerless, hope doesn't necessarily make the storm cease, but it grounds us in the midst of the storm. Perhaps that is why the writer of Hebrews speaks of *hope* as being the *anchor* of the soul. Hope provides stability when we feel powerless because it tethers us to God's promises.

There is one individual in the Scriptures who, more than anyone, had experience with being out at sea in the midst of storms and being shipwrecked. He often traveled along the Mediterranean Sea in hopes of sharing the gospel message. He was a missionary for most of his adult life. His name was Paul, and he had the experience of being shipwrecked four different times! Suffice it to say, he was an expert at being shipwrecked! According to 2 Corinthians 11, Paul was shipwrecked three times; then, in Acts 27, he was shipwrecked again on his way to Rome.

Here's the background: Paul had been told not to go to Jerusalem because if he did, he would be arrested. He went to Jerusalem anyway and got arrested on all sorts of false accusations and trumped up charges about his being an Egyptian terrorist who had led an insurrection. You can't make this kind of stuff up! After his arrest, he was thrown on a grain ship bound for Rome where he would make his appeal before Caesar. On the journey, the ship stopped on the Island of Crete at a marina called Fair Havens. Paul suggested to the crew that they stay there through the winter, but the crew decided to go on. Now Paul had been shipwrecked three times; he knew that it was late October and that an ancient proverb said the Mediterranean

Sea was difficult to traverse in September but impossible by November. Nobody would listen to him. That is where we pick up the story, in Acts 27:13-20.

When a gentle wind began to blow, they saw their opportunity; so they weighed anchor and sailed along the shore of Crete.

By the way, if this were a movie, this would be the scene where they set sail and you see the wind gently blowing in the hair of those on board, but there would be a cello playing some ominous music in the background foreshadowing what comes next. The story continues...

¹⁴Before very long, a wind of hurricane force, called the Northeaster, swept down from the island. ¹⁵The ship was caught by the storm and could not head into the wind; so we gave way to it and were driven along. ¹⁶As we passed to the lee of a small island called Cauda, we were hardly able to make the lifeboat secure, ¹⁷so the men hoisted it aboard. Then they passed ropes under the ship itself to hold it together. Because they were afraid they would run aground on the sandbars of Syrtis, they lowered the sea anchor and let the ship be driven along. ¹⁸We took such a violent battering from the storm that the next day they began to throw the cargo overboard. ¹⁹On the third day, they threw the ship's tackle overboard with their own hands. ²⁰When neither sun nor stars appeared for many days and the storm continued raging, we finally gave up all hope of being saved.

Nothing like an uplifting scripture passage, right? Pastors don't typically choose scripture passages that end with phrases like, "... and then everyone gave up all hope of being saved." But, there's more to the story, which we will talk about in a bit.

As we said earlier, life has often been compared to a voyage across stormy seas, and in the midst of a voyage across stormy seas, we need a hope that holds. Earlier Pastor Steven read Hebrews 6:19 which says, "We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure."

Not only do we need hope, we need a properly placed hope. In this Scripture, we are going to see several different places where the crew placed their hope. Before we get there, let's look at our own lives, because our lives often feel a little like being on a stormy sea. It often feels like we're about to be shipwrecked. Life can be sailing smoothly for a while, and then out of nowhere, a Nor'easter comes along and changes everything. There might have been some pink clouds on the horizon, but they have turned dark; the sea might have been placid and calm, but then it gets chaotic.

Have you ever received a diagnosis that rattled you to the bones? The doctor in a white coat walks into the room and delivers a simple sentence full of potent words that render the rest of his words completely mute. Things had been cruising along and then all of a sudden, this Nor'easter blows in and your life is twisted and turned upside down. You face test after test and appointment after appointment followed by a treatment regimen and suddenly your life is in a completely different state. You know the truth of the passage that we have been reading today.

Maybe you are in a family where things seemed to be going along smoothly, and then something happened. Maybe from the kids' perspective everything was going well, but the parents tell them that although they've tried hard, their marriage isn't working anymore. The kids are left in turbulent waters, trying to figure out where they will live and what holidays will look like. Suddenly this storm is not a small storm; it is one with consequences for the rest of their lives.

Maybe you've been a parent or grandparent and seen that, for the first part of their lives, your children or grandchildren had some really small problems, but then there is a change in schools, or a change in life, or a new girlfriend or boyfriend, and suddenly the problems that were once small have been overtaken by problems that are much bigger—just like the storm my family encountered on our way to Cayo Costa. Sometimes the problems balloon! We've all been in circumstances where things were going along smoothly, but

then a Nor'easter shook everything up. How can we move forward? Where can we place our hope that is firm and secure?

I'm fascinated by where the crew of Paul's ship placed their hope. Did you notice where they first placed their hope when seeking security? They pulled in the lifeboat! Typically, the lifeboat was pulled behind the ship, and this lifeboat would have been battered and tossed around and probably filled with water. With great difficulty, they pulled the lifeboat onto the ship and then wrapped the rope from the lifeboat around the hull of the ship so that when the waves battered against the sides of the ship it would hold it together. Isn't this so often what we try to do in our lives when we go into emergency response mode? We pull in the life raft and think that if we just hold on a little tighter, we can make it through the storm. But that assumes that the storm is a small Southwest Florida afternoon storm that blows through quickly, not the storm in this story which went on for 14 days and 14 nights! You can't hold on with your own strength all that time; you just don't have the energy.

The crew went days without food. They went nights without sleeping as they tried to hold the ship together. They placed their hope in their own strength as though they could just hold everything together. But as you and I know, our strength is fleeting. On our own, we are not going to be able to hold everything together.

The crew not only tries to hold the ship together, they throw out an anchor. It's not an anchor like you might imagine, however. It's not a huge iron anchor that goes deep into the ocean, grabs the ocean floor, and holds firm. They throw out a floating anchor that is designed to give maximum resistance against the wind, but it does not hold firm. You and I try this, too. We try to grasp onto something that will give us stability, but the anchors we grab onto are just not strong enough.

When I was a kid, I went to youth group and on mission trips with the church. I would always invite friends who I thought were going through some challenging times to come with me. I remember

inviting one of my friends to come on a mission trip. Before the trip was a meeting with the parents to go over the details, and my friend and his mom were there. After the meeting, his mom came up to me and said that she was so glad that I had invited her son to go on the trip. She said, "He really needs some moral guidance in his life."

I thought she was so, so close but was still just missing out. He didn't just need to make better decisions, he needed an anchor that would hold. Essentially, she was saying that he needed some good *morality* from the trip, but he did not need all the Jesus stuff. What he really needed was Jesus to anchor his life!

Several years ago, the best man from a wedding I had performed told me he had just proposed to his girlfriend and he wondered if I would perform their wedding. His only problem was that, although he felt he was a good person, he was not religious and asked if I would do a non-Christian wedding for them. I said I could not and told him, "I am a pastor. If you want a non-religious wedding, you can find a ship's captain or a judge or someone else to do the service for you, but for professional integrity, I only do Christian weddings." The reason I only do Christian weddings is because I know this about human nature: if we rely on our own strength, on the promises that we make, we are not going to be good enough. If we tap into the power of God for the commitments and promises that we make, God can strengthen us through them. The reason I will not perform a non-Christian wedding is because they need an anchor so that their promises can be sure and secure. The couple had the right idea. They were going to make promises to each other, but it was with a floating anchor; one that wouldn't go deep enough.

Culturally we see this too, by the way. When we find a problem within our nation, how many times do we try to legislate the solution to it? Essentially, we are trying to throw a floating anchor. We know that behavior modification is needed, but we are not getting to the deepest part of the heart, which needs to be anchored in Jesus Christ. So the second thing the crew throws out is the

anchor, but it's just the wrong anchor! It doesn't go deep enough; it's not secure enough.

What's the third thing the crew of Paul's ship does? I think this is funny and perfectly illustrates what we try to do so often and just how futile our efforts sometimes are. Remember, they are on a ship headed for Rome to sell their grain which provides their livelihood and supports the health and well-being of their families. After days and days of being tossed around in the waves, they start throwing their cargo overboard! It's like taking their money and throwing it at the storm to make it stop! How often do we throw money at our problems in hopes that they'll go away? We need to place our hope somewhere else entirely.

Paul had tried to warn the crew earlier in the chapter, twice in fact, not to set sail. He knew that the Mediterranean was dangerous this time of year, yet they didn't listen to him. In verse 21 he said, "Men, you should have taken my advice not to sail from Crete; then you would have spared yourselves this damage and loss." He then began to paint a picture of the hope that they could anchor to. The night before, an angel had come to Paul and told him that the ship would sink, but because Paul had a plan and a purpose for his life (to tell Caesar about Jesus), the entire crew would be saved. Paul told the crew this the next day in verse 22: "But now I urge you to keep up your courage, because not one of you will be lost; only the ship will be destroyed."

Some of the crew who heard this message believed in the hope, but others did not and turned their focus inward. In the middle of the night, those who did not believe dropped the lifeboat into water, tried to abandon ship, and drifted away. The rest of the crew huddled together and made it through the storm. When we don't cling to the firm anchor of hope, we turn inward and become selfish. However, the members of the crew who took this hope, regained their strength and, sure enough, a few days later the ship crashed onto the shore of Malta with not a single life lost.

Scripture never promises that if we have faith, life will be easy. The Scripture never promises that storms will go away and that ships will not sink. The Scripture does promise that if we have hope, in the midst of whatever circumstances we find ourselves, that hope is firm and secure because it's grounded in Jesus Christ.

A secular psychologist, Martin Seligman, observed the reality that faith and hope have in our lives. He said, "Not only does faith produce hopeful people, but more robust faith produces more robust hope." The faith that we have anchors us in the promises of God, and sustains and grounds us in a time of great storm and turbulence. Faith is the only anchor which will hold us!

Ironically, the disciples knew this. In Matthew 8 when they were on the Sea of Galilee and the squall came upon them, they ran to Jesus. Jesus said to them in verse 26: "You of little faith." He calmed the storm around them and the disciples said of him: "What kind of man is this? Even the winds and the waves obey him!" (Matthew 8:27) We sometimes feel powerless, trapped in the storms of our lives. It is then that we need to go to the only One who has the power to overcome the storms.

With the help of the VBS kids, we are going to proclaim the truth of what we have been talking about:

- When we feel shipwrecked, we can rely on Jesus, who will rescue us.
- When we are lonely, Jesus rescues.
- When we are worried, Jesus rescues.
- When we struggle, Jesus rescues.
- When we sin, Jesus rescues.
- When we feel powerless, Jesus rescues.

Whatever the circumstance, whatever has been going on for days or weeks or months, Jesus is walking right with us and can **rescue us!**

