GOD’S GRACE IN THE STORM

Acts 27:1-44

Key Verse:27:24 “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.”

 Have you ever watched James Cameron’s movie “Titanic”? What is your most impressive scene in the movie? Many people remember the romantic scene of Leonard DiCaprio and Kate Winslet on the bow of the ship. As for me the scenes of each person’s reaction in the time of crisis, especially when the gigantic ship was sinking, was very impressive. The main character Jack did his best to save Rose. Many people tried to save their lives by pushing others away, even killing each other to take the seat of lifeboats. The captain was willing to die with his sinking ship. The musicians kept on playing music while the passengers were desperate for their lives. We see the pictures of all these responses from the desperate people in the face of death. We come to know who they are and what kind of lives they have lived before the coming storm and in the moments of their deaths. Last Tuesday was my one year anniversary of God’s miracle, saving my life from a cardiac arrest. I confronted a perfect storm in my life a year ago. But God spared my life from among 1 % of survival probability and extended my life until today. I thanked God and appreciate all those who loved me and prayed for my recovery since I became sick. I thought about how I have responded to my deadly hours and how I have lived since I was saved by God’s grace. God showed his grace during my storm.

 How will you respond to an unexpected storm and danger in your life? In today’s passage we learn how God helped Paul in the storm and how Paul acted during a time of crisis. I pray that we may all experience God’s grace in the storms of our life and that we may also overcome all of our storms as Paul overcame his. Amen.

First, storms come unexpectedly and all of sudden (1-20) In the movie ‘Titanic’ the gigantic cruise ship was sailing smoothly, and all the passengers on board were enjoying their trip by dancing, having drinking parties, and playing cards until the ship hit an iceberg. All of sudden sea water erupted from the bottom of the ship, and the ship began to sink into the deep sea at the dark night. Who could have expected this disaster to strike the gigantic ship *Titanic*? Who expected the coronavirus to become a deadly and global pandemic? Who knew that I almost lost my life a year ago? Likewise, storms come unexpectedly and suddenly without any warning or notice. Jesus also comes again unexpectedly and suddenly without giving any notice. Jesus said he would come like a thief that no one notices when he comes to judge the world. So he warned, “Be ready and watch out!” (Mt 24:42)

 After 4 trials in Jerusalem and Caesarea during over two and half years, Paul was finally about to leave for Rome to stand before Caesar. This was because Paul had appealed to Caesar to defend himself from the Jews. Paul was handed over to a centurion named Julius, who belonged to the Imperial Regiment. Luke the author of the Acts and Aristarchus also joined Paul for the journey. The ship which Paul took on board sailed from Caesarea, Sidon, to Myra in Lycia after passing the lee of Cyprus. (3-5) At Myra they changed their ship to an Alexandrian ship for Italy. After struggling for many days because of turbulent winds, they arrived at a small port in the island of Crete named Fair Havens. (7-8) It was after the Day of Atonement according to the Jewish calendar. It was around late September or early October on the Sun Calendar when sailing was considered risky and dangerous. (9) So Paul warned the centurion not to sail because of the possible storm. “***Men, I can see that our voyage is going to be disastrous and bring great loss to ship and cargo, and to our own lives also.”*** (10) But the centurion, instead of listening to what Paul said, followed the advice of the pilot and of the owner of the ship. (11) They wanted to spend the winter at Phoenix, the bigger harbor, rather than at Fair Haven, where they thought unsuitable to winter in. (12) The ship which took Paul seemed to sail smoothly with the gentle breeze. When a gentle south wind began to blow, they saw their opportunity; so they weighed anchor and sailed along the shore of Crete. They expected to reach Phoenix soon because it was not far from Fair Haven. But before long, a wind of hurricane force, called the Northeaster, swept down from the island. (14) The ship was caught by the storm and could not head into the wind. So they gave way to it and were driven along. (15) The wind was so strong that in order to save the lifeboat the sailors hoisted it aboard and tied the ship with ropes. (17,18) The storm continued. They were afraid that their ship would run aground on the sandbars of Syrtis, so they lowered the sea anchor and let the ship be driven along. This means that they were out of control from the storm. In order to lighten their ship, they began to throw items into the sea one by one starting with cargo and then the ship’s tackles. (19) Verse 20 tells us their desperate situation. “***When neither sun nor stars appeared for many days and the storm continued raging, we finally gave up all hope of being saved***.” (20)

The centurion ignored Paul’s warning, assuming that Paul was a mere prisoner. If the centurion listened to Paul’s warning, he could have avoided the storm. We may blame the centurion Julius. But we must receive a lesson from this story that we also meet storms in unexpected times and all of sudden. We don’t know when, from where, and how. But don’t be afraid of the coming storms. Don’t blame others. Rather admit the stormy situation and accept it as is. Then God will teach us what to do next.

Second, remember the promise of God (21-26) Now it is Paul’s turn to raise his voice after much failure and suffering. What did Paul do? Look at verses 21-26. “***After they had gone a long time without food, Paul stood up before them and said: “Men, you should have taken my advice not to sail from Crete; then you would have spared yourselves this damage and loss. But now I urge you to keep up your courage, because not one of you will be lost; only the ship will be destroyed. 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. So keep up your courage, men, for I have faith in God that it will happen just as he told me. Nevertheless, we must run aground on some island.”*** Paul rebuked all the people who did not listen to his advice. And he encouraged them to have hope in the God of Paul, who had promised him with the salvation and safety of all who were with him. In the past Paul remembered the Lord’s message when he was discouraged by the trial before the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem. One night the Lord appeared to Paul and said, “***Take courage! As you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome***.” (Ac 23:11) Paul had a vision of testifying about Jesus before Caesar in Rome. He believed that the Lord Jesus would protect him until he stood before Caesar. No matter how difficult and dangerous the situation, he believed that God would send him to Rome either way. Paul also believed that God would save all others’ lives for his sake, too. Paul remembered the promise of God and had absolute faith in him. The night before Paul stood before the crowd in the ship; an angel of the Lord appeared to Paul and reassured him of God’s promise.

 What is the most important and urgent thing for us to do in the midst of storm? First of all we must remember the promise of God. We must remember that God is with us in our storm and will be with us to the end. Jesus promised to his disciples just before he went to heaven. “*And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”* (Mt 28:29) Because of this promise the British missionary in Africa David Livingstone lived in the African jungle for 30 years. Because of this promise more than 3,000 UBF missionaries went out to the world to preach the gospel during the last 50 years. One of our UBF missionaries in New Jersey was infected by the coronavirus, and she struggled for months in ICU between death and life. By God’s grace and the prayers of all co-workers around the world she got healed. The day she was discharged from the hospital, she testified that she remembered Psalm 23 and that the good shepherd Jesus would rescue her from the darkest valleys of death. Last year I had the very similar experience like her as I held Psalm 91.

 This world is now in the midst of global pandemic. America is going through another storm because of George Floyd’s death and riots. In this time of crisis we must go back to the Bible. We must remember God’s word, his covenant with his people in Exodus 19:5,6, “*Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation*.” The word of God is a lamp to our feet and a light for our path. (Ps 119:105) The word of God is a compass for national direction and an answer for global peace. If you think that you are in the midst of a storm, remember the promise of God and hold it as a matter of life and death. Have faith in God who will protect you from all harm and danger and guide you until you reach the heavenly harbors. As Paul said that they would lose cargo and the ship, but save their lives. What is good and necessary enough for them to save the whole world, but lose their lives? We must thank God when he saves our lives even though we lose something from this world.

Third, take care of others in the midst of storm (27-44) In time of urgent situations many people become self-centered and selfish. There are some deleted scenes from the movie *Titanic* where a crewmate took a lifeboat with several passengers and ran away from the sinking ship to run for his life. He disobeyed the captain’s order to come back to take more passengers. But the selfish crewmate rowed the boat away from the ship. After fourteen days of being driven along the Adriatic Sea, Paul’s ship was finally approaching an island. They measured the depth of the sea by the sounding tests. (27-29) Look at verses 30-32. “***In an attempt to escape from the ship, the sailors let the lifeboat down into the sea, pretending they were going to lower some anchors from the bow. Then Paul said to the centurion and the soldiers, “Unless these men stay with the ship, you cannot be saved.” So the soldiers cut the ropes that held the lifeboat and let it drift away.***” The selfish sailors didn’t care about other people on the ship if only they were saved. So they pretended to work for the ship and planned to run away, but were caught by Paul, who was always concerned about other’s safety. This time the centurion listened to Paul and frustrated the sailors’ selfish plan. Suppose the ship sank or received damage without sailors! Paul knew that they would become like a sheep without a shepherd.

 Paul’s leadership with a shepherd heart continued. Look at verses 33-38. “***Just before dawn Paul urged them all to eat. “For the last fourteen days,” he said, “you have been in constant suspense and have gone without food—you haven’t eaten anything. Now I urge you to take some food. You need it to survive. Not one of you will lose a single hair from his head.” After he said this, he took some bread and gave thanks to God in front of them all. Then he broke it and began to eat. They were all encouraged and ate some food themselves. Altogether there were 276 of us on board. When they had eaten as much as they wanted, they lightened the ship by throwing the grain into the sea***.” Paul was different from the selfish sailors. He took care of the hungry people. He knew that they had not eaten for a long time because of the storm and had been very hungry and exhausted. Paul knew that they had to eat to fight the storm to the end. He encouraged them not only to have faith in God, but also to eat some food for survival. Paul’s example reminds us of Jesus who took bread before the five thousand, gave thanks to God, broke it, and distributed it to the crowd. (Mt 14:19, Mk 6:41, Lk 9:16, Jn 6:11) Paul was a good shepherd for them. Jesus said in John 10:11, “*I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep*.” The good shepherd does not care about himself to protect his sheep. David risked his life in order to rescue his sheep from the mouth of a lion. (1Sa 17:35) David was a good shepherd. Paul was a good shepherd because he really took care of the people in the storm. But David and Paul were none but the shadow of Jesus, who laid down his life for his sheep. Jesus gave his life on the cross in order to save sinners like us from eternal punishment. By his sacrificial death on the cross we are saved. He is like the person who gave his lifeboat for us and was drowned in our place. Who is a true leader in the time of crisis? Who is a true shepherd for the sheep? They are those who take care of others instead of themselves. They are those who are willing to sacrifice their lives for others. May God raise many disciples of Jesus from among political and religious leaders in this country!

Finally, everyone reached land safely (39-44) When daylight came, they did not recognize the land, but they saw a bay with a sandy beach.(39) After the long struggling with the storm, finally they found land. After loosening the anchors, they were ready to land on the beach. But there remained a final test for them. When the ship struck a sandbar, the bow stuck fast and would not move, and the stern was shattered to pieces by the pounding of the surf. The ship was stuck and wrecked before it landed. They had no other choice but jump into the sea and swim to the land. The soldiers planned to kill the prisoners, but the centurion saved all prisoners for the sake of Paul. (42,43) The centurion ordered those who could swim to jump overboard first and get to land. The rest were to get there on planks or on other pieces of the ship. In this way everyone reached land safely.(44)

Last Friday missionary Luke Yang said that our life is a voyage, sailing to the kingdom of heaven. What he said is true. While sailing to the kingdom of heaven, we meet many storms of life such as the loss of loved one, illness, poverty, failure, and so on. But God will let everyone of us reach the land safely. No matter how difficult and dangerous our journey may be, we will arrive at the heavenly harbor safely. God will be with us until then. We call this God’s grace. By God’s grace we are saved and by God’s grace we will reach the land safely. 275 people were saved from the storm because of Paul. They were saved because Paul was with them. Paul said in verse 24, “*God graciously give you the lives of all who sail with you*.” In the same way God graciously saves us because of Jesus who sails with us. As long as Jesus is in our boat, we will be graciously and safely in heaven. Amen!

Since our life is a voyage to heaven, we don’t need anything, but our life. In the middle of the storm the men on Paul’s ship began to toss things overboard one by one starting with cargo, the ship’s tackle, lifeboat, and even their food. When they arrived at land, they had only their own bodies. Our life voyage to heaven is like this by getting rid of extraneous things one by one until we have only ourselves. The day will come to everyone of us that all what we have saved, accumulated, and achieved on this earth may become a great burden to our journey to heaven. Jacob in the Old Testament showed a good example. Jacob worked hard in his uncle’s house and became rich. He had four wives and 12 children. But when he confronted the hour of death, he became greatly troubled. All he had accumulated and achieved became a burden to him. Let us practice how to get rid of unnecessary things one by one for our safe and joyful journey to heaven. Hebrews 12:1,2 says, “*Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles And let us run with perseverance that the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God*.” Amen!