

Shipwrecked
Acts 27: 7-44
Jon Frost

Just about every morning since 2011, Denny Dyke has taken to the sands off the coast in Bandon, Oregon for his morning ritual. With just a few rakes and spears, as well as perhaps a few extra rakers, he spends the next 2 hours slowly working like an artist on a giant canvas. **The result is this (cue video)** - intricately carved sand labyrinths that can be up to 100 feet across and are easily visible from the cliffs above. He began modeling his designs after famous cathedral labyrinths but has since been adding his own designs as well. Tourists and locals alike flock to his most recent "draws" and walk the path as it unfolds before them.

And yet, like clockwork, every day the crowds dissipate. The sun sets and the tide comes back in, washing away every twist and turn, every footprint, every perfect shape raked into the sand. Each day the labyrinth is erased and the canvas is cleaned, ready for the next day's design to begin anew.

When I came across Denny's story, my first thought was "I really want to go Bandon, Oregon because it looks amazing." But there was also part of me that thought, "That's a whole lot of expended effort knowing the entire time that it will all be destroyed every day. Why not just move a ton of the sand up on the cliffs and install a permanent sand labyrinth there where it would be out of the water's reach? Why go through the trouble?"

In the middle of Acts 27, we join Paul and a motley crew of prisoners, sailors, and soldiers sea-bound for Italy. Earlier in the narrative, Paul had bounced around defending himself between various religious and political authorities until ultimately he appealed his own case to the highest power in the land - the tribunal of the emperor himself in Rome. So off to see the emperor he goes.

And Luke, the author of Acts, really takes his time in telling this story, of which I only read a portion. But here are the highlights. Earlier in the chapter after difficult sailing for just about half of the journey Paul warned his companions against continuing on given the difficulty they already encountered. But the centurion in command didn't heed Paul's advice and pressed on. As you might expect, Paul was right and they soon found themselves at the mercy of violent winds and storms driven this way and that, desperately trying whatever they could to survive - throwing cargo as well as the ship's tackle overboard.

In the midst of the desperation, Paul gave a morale boosting speech in which he says, "Keep up your courage men, for there will be no loss of life among you, but only of the ship. For an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I worship said to me do not be afraid; God has granted safety to all those who are sailing with you."

The next day Paul thwarted the plan of the sailors to make a break for it in the ship's boat because he was only guaranteed the safety of those who stayed with him. As no one had eaten in 14 days Paul gathered everyone together and did you catch the Eucharistic resonance of what he does? He urged his companions to eat and he took bread, gave thanks to God in their presence, broke it, and then they all ate.

The next day, it became obvious that the ship would run aground, so the soldiers plan to kill the prisoners in their charge to avoid the same fate should they later on be asked by their superiors to give account of the whereabouts of their prisoners. But for some reason, the centurion, who it's clear has become fond of or intrigued by this prisoner Paul, prevented them from carrying out this evil. Everyone made it safely to shore clinging to whatever piece of the ship they could.

As you hear this story it's really kind of remarkable how much Paul inserts himself into the action. I mean why bother yourself with what happens to hired sailors, prisoners who've done God knows what, and soldiers who would just as soon stab you in the back as you jump into the sea? Why go through the trouble?

I suspect it is because of Paul's persistent obedience to the vocation God had given to him. He had appealed his case to the emperor and with singular focus Paul's trajectory is headed toward Rome. These storms on the sea are not the last ones he will face. In the meantime, he never misses an opportunity to be Christ's witness. He never clocks out of his role as an apostle. No one is an unworthy audience for the good news Paul has to share and no one is undeserving of care in the midst of difficulty.

Luke stops short of describing the meal on the boat as communion. After all, it is Paul with presumably a bunch of pagans. But it is clear that Paul's actions are shaped by that sacred meal. Everything he does is shaped by that meal. Because Paul knows that the greatest rescue has already happened in the death and resurrection of Jesus, a great summary of which appears in Colossians 1 saying "God has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his Beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins."

Horatio Spafford was a successful attorney in Chicago in the 1800s. After the great Chicago fire of 1871 wiped out his family's extensive real estate investments, he decided to lift his family's spirits by taking them on a vacation to Europe. And so in November of 1873, his wife Anna along with their four daughters Maggie, Tanetta,

Annie, and Bessie, boarded the S.S. Ville Du Havre. However, Horatio was detained on business and planned to join them soon.

In the late hours of November 22nd, the ship was struck by an English vessel and sank within a couple of hours. Horatio's wife Anna was among the 47 survivors but tragically the 4 daughters were lost. Once the survivors reached land Anna cabled her husband with the message "saved alone." Sometime later, Horatio Spafford traveled the same route as his family to meet his wife in Paris. He later penned the words to a hymn which begins "When peace like a river attendeth my way; when sorrows like sea billows roll; Whatever my lot, Thou hast taught me to say, It is well, It is well with my soul." How is that possible? In the storms of life, how can the Christian say "It is well?" Doesn't that seem to minimize the significance of things like pain, injustice and evil?

In the magazine article where I discovered the story of Denny Dyke, the author writes, "Labyrinths are orderly, even though you may not be able to see the end from where you start. A one-way path leads from entrance to goal.... one walks prayerfully along the way, spiraling around the previous night's flotsam of kelp or beer cans and around thousand-year-old sea stacks. Encountering the moveable and the immovable, the minor problem and the major circumstance."

Doesn't that sound a lot like life? We journey along discovering all manner of thing along the way. We can't see the end clearly. But we can say "It is well" because our story through and through is a story of rescue out of the waters. It's the Noah story, Exodus story, Jesus story, Paul story, and our story. And that rescue comes with a communion shaped vocation to extend that rescue to any and all we meet in whatever way we are able.

In the midst of the storms raging in the world, to me the one to which our Christian vocation is calling urgently this day is what is happening to thousands of immigrant children along our borders, separated from their families to apparently teach their parents not to come here.

More and more articles are coming out about what exactly is happening and what the conditions are like where these children are, and more and more I am sick to my stomach. On a day when across the nation we will be celebrating fathers and the importance of family; when a month ago we did the same for Mother's Day, we cannot sit idly and silently while families are torn apart. Church, we need to raise our voice that this is not ok. We need to tell our representatives that as people of faith, informed by Scripture, there is nothing biblical about what our government is doing to children.

I conclude with words from the stated clerk of our denomination, J Herbert Nelson, addressed to our general assembly yesterday. "The crisis of tens of thousands of

desperate people coming to the United States for relief seems almost overwhelming. But as the officials of our government attempt to address the crisis, we cannot afford to tarnish the highest values of our nation. We must not punish desperate parents by tearing their children away from them, leaving the parents without access to the children or assurance of their welfare.

In the name of God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ: Stop!"

Amen.

Resources

Berger, Rose Marie. "Devil and the Deep Blue Sea." *Sojourners*, 2017, p. 31.

Wright, N. T. *Acts for Everyone: Chapters 13-28*. Westminster John Knox, 2015.

<http://www.pcusa.org/news/2018/6/16/stated-clerk-issues-statement-separated-immigrant-/>