

# Bread in the Storm

sermon digest

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Acts 27:18-27

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Wednesday evening, as I was preparing my dish for our church dinner, I was, as usual, listening to the evening news on National Public Radio. The news, again as usual, was on the economic situation. Only this evening, it was focused on the struggle going on in Europe, and in particular, on Germany's fear, some would even say paranoia, of inflation. Germans recall the nightmare of the 1920's when the Weimar Republic, struggling to lift the country out of debt following World War I, printed an astronomical amount of money and triggered what may well be considered the worst inflation in history. Money became so worthless, the NPR commentators noted, that people carted it around in wheelbarrows to do their shopping. At one point, it cost one million marks just to mail a letter. The bills were so worthless, they were used as wallpaper in German bathrooms. Many Germans believe it led to what happened next, something much worse - the rise of Adolf Hitler. Today, a children's educational cartoon on the European Central Bank's website portrays inflation as a looming monster that, once it gains control, can lead to horrible realities.

We are all well aware of the tragedies that can be spawned in hard times. Human history has shown us again and again that demagogues stand poised, ready to capitalize on times of instability and fear. The human targets may vary. They may be the Jews and socialists, trade unionists and gypsies in Hitler's Germany, the Tutsis in Rwanda, or the Muslims in Bosnia. They may be the Blacks of Jim Crow America or supposed welfare queens or all Muslims simply because they are Muslim or older Americans simply because they are drawing Social Security and relying on Medicare. In times of social distress, in times of economic hardship, we know the importance of trying to keep our heads on straight so that we can use our best thinking in working together to address the situation and not let fear and anger distort our judgment and victimize the innocent. We need, you might say, calm voices in the midst of the storm, calm, reasoned, insightful leaders and citizenry to face the realities that must be faced and help us find our way to the other side.

**The bread of Christ's table is the bread of hope.** Step aboard ship with me this morning, if you will, and into the midst of a literal storm. "We put out to sea," Luke writes in Acts; and from that moment, you can almost feel an ominous sense of foreboding and dread. "Even the Fast had already gone by," he says. Making reference to the Day of Atonement, Luke is saying that the time was mid September or October—a time when winter storms began to toss the sea and obliterate the sun and stars by which ships sailed. Seasoned sailors, those who used their heads, knew that the time to undertake a voyage was well past; and sure enough, a northeaster blew the ship out from the safe shoreline into a raging sea. As you read the account of what happened next, the rapid tempo of one desperate act to save the ship after another brings you face to face with the stark terror of the moment.

After days of torment, Luke says plainly, "all hope of our being saved was at last abandoned." Paul speaks to the crew a word of hope from "the God to whom I belong and whom I worship". On the fourteenth day, he bade them eat: "He took bread; and giving thanks to God in the presence of all, he broke it and began to eat." Sound familiar? Some doubt whether Luke intentionally used the formula for the Eucharist, and point to a variation in the fourfold formula he had used in describing Jesus breaking bread with the disciples on the road to Emmaus. While Luke says Paul ate the bread, he does not say that Paul, as Jesus, distributed the bread.

Although the similarities seem too great to dismiss, whether Luke was consciously invoking the image of Christ's table or not, the bread that Paul broke had a calming effect. Having broken the bread, "in the presence of all," he encouraged all of them to eat. "All of them were encouraged and took food for themselves." Hope restored, the crew returned to their work. If the bread Paul broke for those Roman soldiers and sailors was not the bread of the Eucharist, it was still, Beverly Gaventa insists, "the bread of hope" [Acts, 355].

**The bread of Christ's table steadies us for the job at hand.** Perhaps no more crucial question is posed for the church than the question of who the church will be in times of discouragement and fear. The church can see itself as merely a roadside stop on the way of getting on with the real business at hand. Church members can drop in occasionally for a bit of inspiration or a quick dose of

prayer. Tucked away in the far removed, irrelevant nooks and crannies of the work-a-day world, Christ's table can serve to do little more than mollify Christians in the midst of our personal storms. It has nothing to do, some insist, with the broader storms sweeping across society.

Worse, we can gather around this table to have our fires of enmity stoked. Here, the other whom we fear can be made into God's enemy; and hatred and warfare can become unleashed in the name of our holy pursuit. In times of economic and social instability the church's stewardship or lack of stewardship of society's prejudices and anger can have a healing or devastating effect. C.K. Chesterton, the widely respected English writer, philosopher, Christian apologist of the last century, is credited with the wise observation, "It is bad to have false gods; it is also bad to have false devils." Too often, demagogues within the church have clawed their way to prominence by mounting a campaign against those society is poised to hate. Be they the Crusades of the Middle Ages, the witch hunts of 18<sup>th</sup> century America, the fulminations of the Ku Klux Klan, or the wholesale condemnation of people of another religion, hatred does not belong at Christ's table.

More than a welcome retreat to which we flee in the midst of our personal or societal storms and other than a place where we stoke our anger against those who are different, Christ's table steadies and empowers us for the work at hand. What is the church's rightful response in times of discouragement and fear? "Like Paul," William Willimon suggests, "the church takes bread, blesses it, breaks it, and begins to eat. . . . In this sign of hope in the power and presence of God . . . the church not only feeds itself but witnesses to the world. . . . The Eucharist is food of confidence shared in the middle of the storm" [Acts, 184-185].

To be honest, the news that flashes across our TV screens and newspapers these days is not good, hopeful, promising news. May God give us the strength and the courage to withstand the temptation to fold in discouragement or to rise up in bitter enmity. May God give us the strength and endurance to be among those who invest their best efforts in finding hopeful, reasonable paths to living out our best and highest ideals as a nation among nations and as churches committed to the God we know in Christ.

Come to Christ's table; and ingesting Christ's hope, go then to live out that hope in the world Christ loves.