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"They Cast Four Anchors from the Stern and Prayed for Daylight"¹

DAVID FLEER

[READING: ACTS 27.6–29]²

Shipwrecks thrive in our consciousness. Nearly a century ago, on April 15, 1912, in its maiden voyage the *Titanic* sank in the North Atlantic off Newfoundland. One thousand five hundred people perished.

A century before the *Titanic*, in 1809, well past safe travel season, Alexander Campbell set sail on the *Hibernia* to meet his father in the New World. After two days at sea the ship went aground near an island off the coast of Scotland. The trauma of the near tragedy sealed Campbell's future: in the chaos of that night he committed his life to ministry of the gospel.

In the century before Campbell, Daniel Defoe published *Robinson Crusoe*, describing his shipwreck, "The fury of the sea came pouring in after me, as high as a great hill, and as furious as an enemy, which I had no means or strength to contend . . ." ³

These tales, of vessels in peril with passengers and crew at the mercy of the hazardous seas, are familiar to us and work deep in our consciousness. And, even though it has been ages since we've heard a prayer with the once familiar plea for those on "storm tossed seas" and even though no one still sings the old classic, "Master the Tempest Is Raging," and even though the origins of the great hymn "When Peace Like a River," where it was composed and the tragedy that preceded its composition, are now lost entirely on the current generation of churchgoers, these tales of shipwreck still awaken and captivate us.⁴

"They cast four anchors from the stern and prayed for daylight."

Shipwreck tales have been in our consciousness for more than twenty centuries and they tend to follow the same pattern:

- An ominous warning not to sail
- A difficult season looms
- Chaotic winds
- Darkness
- Horrendous waves

1. This sermon was delivered as the closing plenary at the May 2010 Pepperdine University Bible Lectures.

2. Selected verses and phrases from this pericope were read aloud at the outset of the sermon, from the New Revised Standard Version.

3. Condensed from segments in the fifth chapter of Daniel Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe* (NY: Cosmopolitan Book Corporation, 1920).

4. The sermon's muse is Ron Hansen's *Exiles* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008). Although the novel appears nowhere in the sermon, its descriptive language, juxtaposition of poetry (Hopkins) with the sinking of the steamship, *Deutschland*, and creative blending of historic incident with fiction all fund the preacher's imagination. Hansen, known for his literary accomplishments, also inspires as a person of faith and occasional lay preacher.

- Sailors scurry about
- Cargo thrown overboard
- Control of the ship relinquished to the storm
- Ship crashes on rocks
- Passengers abandon all hope⁵

“They cast four anchors from the stern and prayed for daylight.”

In ancient Rome students training in rhetoric composed tales from these common stock bullet points, “how to write a shipwreck story,” using these plot lines. In fact, so predictable was this shipwreck genre it became the object of first-century satire and parody; grist for the ancient world’s version of *Saturday Night Live*. Luke follows this form with precision.

In recent years, a Canadian crooner sang:

The wind in the wires made a tattletale sound

And a wave broke over the railing
And every man knew, as the Captain did, too,

T’was the witch of November come stealing . . .
Captain wired in, said “water’s comin’ in,”

And the good ship and crew were in peril
And later that night, with its lights out of sight,
Came the wreck of the *Edmund Fitzgerald*.⁶

Even Gordon Lightfoot’s Billboard pop chart hit of 1976 carries the rhythm of the sequence of the shipwreck genre.

And in Luke’s account they are sailing perilously late in the season (“after the fast”), when treacherous seas force them to hug the hazardous coastline until, eventually, “they cast four anchors from the stern and prayed for daylight.”

The language and images provoke our imagination, and while the Stamps Baxter tunes are gone and the prayer language of “high and stormy seas” has evaporated, the visual imagery is so lively it nearly stands up by itself and walks off to point out the shipwrecks among us.

And it doesn’t take a great homiletic eye to spot the current *Titanics* and *Hibernias* and *Edmund Fitzgeralds* that litter our lives.

Family: “Dad was too often gone. Mother’s heart strayed. Brother’s appetites consumed him. Our family was a wreck.”

Church: “Our congregation was unable to change.” Or, “. . . unwilling to cling to the unchangeable.” “No one was at the helm. Young people drifted away. We sailed into the fog. Our church was lost at sea!”

Or, tonight someone could write: Three score and eleven years ago our Fathers brought forth upon this continent, Christian Colleges conceived in devotion, and dedicated to the proposition that their children should receive a Christian higher education. But, now we are engulfed in a great and terrible storm testing

5. Adapted from Charles H. Talbert, *Reading Acts: A Literary and Theological Commentary on The Acts of the Apostles* (New York: Crossroad, 1997), 216–217.

6. Gordon Lightfoot, “The Wreck of the *Edmund Fitzgerald*,” *Summertime Dream*, Reprise Records, 1976.

whether our colleges and universities so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure.⁷

And given the sinking of Cascade College and our smaller schools pummeled on hazardous shores, what will become of the Christian college?

Before we pirate the shipwreck image for our sermonic interests, kidnap its stimulating language to apply to the major concerns of our lives, as poets and singers and novelists long have done, I ask an essential and one-word question: How does *Luke* use the shipwreck? Why does *Luke* include the shipwreck at the close of Acts? Why this shipwreck here? *Why?!?*⁸

We all think we know why the shipwrecks occur. The films teach us. The *Titanic* created an exciting backdrop for Kate Winslet and Leonardo DiCaprio to pursue their romantic adventures.

Shipwreck for the *Swiss Family Robinson* allows Fritz and Ernst to come of age, ride ostriches, battle pirates and conquer paradise.

"Why?" Robinson Crusoe salvages tools, builds a hut, makes clothing, raises goats, reads the Bible, becomes religious and thanks God for his fate in which nothing is missing, save society.

"Why?" For Alexander Campbell the stakes are high. After the *Hibernia* breaks apart and the family is safe ashore they take lodging in Glasgow. For the next 300 days (between wreck and the next voyage) twenty-year-old Alexander is immersed in influences and practices that shape his life's work. Without Campbell's shipwreck, we'd probably have a pipe organ drowning out our singing, take communion once a year, and read scripture through the lens of emotion!

"Why?" Even Gordon Lightfoot wonders:

Does anyone know where the love of God goes

When the waves turn the minutes to hours . . .

The church bell chimed, 'til it rang 29 times

For each man on the *Edmund Fitzgerald*.

Luke wasn't the last, nor does he get the prize for the first tale in the shipwreck genre. However, Luke's not after original screenplay; but content and motive and reason. And, the shipwreck in Acts is radically different in meaning from the tales we know so well!

So, what is the motive of the shipwreck tale? "Why?"

For Alexander Campbell, as for Robinson Crusoe, the shipwreck begins a transformative adventure; it's the start of something radically new!

When the *Titanic* sinks, to the tune of "Nearer, My God, to Thee," fifteen hundred persons plunge beneath the icy waters. It creates an epic tragedy that burns in the consciousness of an entire generation.

But, while the structure of the shipwreck in Acts is nearly identical in form with every other ancient and modern tale in the history of this genre, its *outcome* is different. No one dies. Disaster is averted. Tragedy is avoided. The shipwreck in Acts is *different*.

And, while the structure of the shipwreck in Acts is nearly identical in form with every other version in the history of this genre, its *location* is so different. It doesn't launch a wild narrative filled with adventure. It's not the beginning of a story; it appears near the end, in the next to last chapter! The shipwreck in Acts is very *different*.

So, why the shipwreck in Acts? "Why?"

7. Adaptation from the form and language of the Gettysburg Address.

8. There occurs no place or reason in this sermon to discuss the scholarly debate: "the shipwreck, fiction or history?" Instead, I take seriously Luke Johnson's admonition to avoid either extreme, which I try to honor by interweaving Hollywood drama (even in a humorous role), historic account, the novel of Campbell's life and a ballad's rendition of a disaster in the Great Lakes. For the argument, see Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, ed. Daniel J. Harrington (Sacra Pagina 5; Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1992). On the other hand, I ignore Johnson's advice to "avoid" the issue most pressing for an answer, "Why does Luke devote so much attention to the voyage?" Instead, both question and answer fuel an essential sermonic move.

Why? Listen! Listen to the quiet that is a voice. A sunbeam splits the dark skies to accent a man on the ship's deck who is speaking in the relative calm before the storm intensifies. It's Paul, and he is announcing to the captain that they ought not sail. He is saying, "Our voyage will be disastrous with great loss to ship and cargo and human life as well."

But, since grain was desperately desired in Rome and since Alexandria was the granary of the empire and since Claudius had insured the market with financial guarantees to pay expenses if ships were lost or hearty bounty upon successful delivery, and since Paul is now sailing on a vessel packed with Alexandrian grain which is traveling the Mediterranean in the most dangerous months . . . Paul's advice against voyage is dismissed by an imperial insurance policy; dismissed by hope for financial gain.

Because in this world, business profits trump human life, and the captain and owner reject Paul's warning and sail into risk and danger.

Oooh—we might have the makings of a sermon. And, since none of us appear to be financial tycoons, we could all enjoy a sermon attacking modern corporate greed that caused the American economy to nearly drown, jobs thrown overboard, retirements slipping under the surface and sinking into the deep . . .

But, at the close of our story, after the famished crew and passengers have taken nourishment, the owner's profit slips overboard, the grain is jettisoned; an ironic and quiet end to imperial greed, a subtle slap in Caesar's face which doesn't provide our sermon enough steam to get out of the harbor and launch a prophetic torpedo against the likes of Wall Street and Goldman Sachs.

In our story, once greed and poor judgment commit them to a course of action, the storm takes over. And, Paul does not pray to silence the wind or still the waves. Nature takes its course. While God works in quieter ways, the storm intensifies.

The music in our story is dark and foreboding, threatening in a minor key. Winds turn to hurricane force; cargo and tackle are cast over the rail. They cut the main sail. The ship is out of control, off its course, out of their knowledge, driven where the fury of the violent seas carry.

They sense land "coming toward them" and take soundings: 120 feet . . . now 90 feet "and they drop four anchors from the stern and pray for daylight."

Now perched on the brink of disaster, fearing they will strike a sunken rock that will rip apart the ship, shatter the timbers, keel over the vessel, fill the hold with water; amidst shrieks and moans and cries of terror.⁹

Listen! Listen to the quiet that is a voice. A sunbeam splits the dark skies and accents the man on the ship's deck. It's Paul, and this time he is speaking at the height of the storm. This time he has a word of comfort for the crew and passengers. He's saying, "Last night God's Angel appeared to me. The God to whom I belong and whom I serve. And God said, 'Don't be afraid. You will stand before the emperor. Take courage.' And, I have faith that God will be faithful, that it will happen exactly as God says."

After earthquake, fire and wind, the sound of sheer silence, the small still voice of God.

As Mary was assured by God's angel in an early scene in Luke's first volume, so Paul is assured by God's angel in a closing scene in the second volume.

As Mary said, "Let it be done to me according to your word," so Paul says, "I have faith in God that it will happen exactly as I've been told."

Paul says, "From none of your heads shall a hair be lost," recalling Jesus in the first volume, who said, "From none of your heads shall a hair be lost," and in the next breath Jesus says, "*For you will gain possession of your lives by your endurance.*"¹⁰

This is why. This is why the shipwreck appears. It provides us this reality, this theology. It hands us this

9. In this paragraph I rely on Louis Cochran's visual language to describe the breaking apart of the *Hibernia*, *The Fool of God: A Novel Based Upon the Life of Alexander Campbell* (Cincinnati: Standard, n.d.), 21.

10. Luke 21.19. I am in debt to Luke Johnson for flagging this and other connections with Luke's first volume. Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 458–59.

script. To know that this is how God works. To know that this is how we should act.

The shipwreck, of course, brings before our eyes the entirety of Luke's theology. His concern for the marginalized; his opposition to the shenanigans of the magicians; the visible and prominent leadership of both women and men; the reasonable defense of Christianity in all settings. And above all, that God is a player in our story.

This is why the shipwreck appears in Acts. And this is what we believe. This is who we are. And this is our script today, amid sunlight and seascape, friends and warm embraces, winds that appear favorable.

And this shall remain our script when clouds darken the horizon and gather above us and favorable winds turn to squall, when night follows day, summer turns to winter, winds increase to gale force and waters churn, a threatening storm upon us. This shall be our script, this shall be our understanding.

If our faith is more performance than proposition, and if how we live is as important as what we say, then these will be our guiding principles:

- Take courage—God is in control.
- You will gain possession of your lives by your endurance.
- Business profits should never trump human life.
- Remember whose you are and to whom you belong.
- Don't act out of fear.

I close, not to speak as a fellow crew member, to describe what we have all seen in the ports, cities and churches. To read the postcards we have all received from our friends and our children who have taken to the lifeboats and have abandoned ship. Who have set off for the safe harbors of the Episcopalian and United Methodist churches, or joined the Purpose Driven fleet. And they are now priests and parishioners and worship leaders and advocates. They write back to us to say that they left to search for meaning, they left to find a theology. Others are simply adrift.

If I were speaking as a fellow crew member, from what we have learned from Paul, I'd say, "Don't drop four anchors from the stern and pray for daylight." But, remember that God is in control, take courage!

Neither do I speak as a meteorologist to report the obvious long-term climatic changes that are impacting our world today. That as Paul sailed into a pre-Christian era so we are sailing into a post-Christian era. That when the *Abilene Reporter-News* covers ACU's lectureship, that in our world today: that is an anomaly. For police to direct Sunday morning church traffic in middle Tennessee's city of steeples, in our world today: that is an anomaly.

If I were speaking as a meteorologist, from what we have learned from our story, I'd say, "Don't drop four anchors from the stern and pray for daylight." But, remember that God is in control, take courage!

So I come not as crew member nor as meteorologist, with familiar observations and calming words. Instead, I speak tonight with the voice of Paul in our shipwreck story, as *prophet*, calling us to remember whose we are and to whom we belong.

I speak tonight of the cultural storm that surrounds us. You might have read about it in this morning's commentary in *The Wall Street Journal* or if you picked up Wednesday's op-ed section of *The New York Times*. It will air again tonight on MSNBC and Fox News. Perhaps you followed it on the radio or television in the broadcasts of Keith Olbermann and Rush Limbaugh. I am speaking of the mean-spirited and vitriolic and hateful discourse that characterized the national dialogue on health care and is currently ongoing in the conversation over immigration. I refer to the Pentecostal governor who incited racial hatred; of the Mormon talk show host who advised Christians to abandon their churches if the minister favors the phrase, "social justice." I am saying, "Master, the tempest is raging! The billows are tossing high. The sky is o'ershadowed

with darkness. No shelter or help is nigh.”

There is a cultural war raging on the high seas and we are being asked to enlist in its service. And so tonight I call us to remember whose we are, to whom we belong. And as Americans continue to gather evidence that only confirms their suppositions, and filter out the evidence that challenges them, this country will continue to polarize and ghettoize. But we of all people, we who are Christians, we who have a theology to guide us, a reality to shape us, we of all people should know how to think and how to act in a storm.

For, if in these times of trouble we distinguish ourselves as Christians who model ourselves after the church in Acts, which models itself after Jesus of Nazareth, then we will provide reason for our friends and for our children and for ourselves not to take to the lifeboats, not to abandon the cause.

Though the issues of the present storm may dissipate before the next election cycle, if we tonight remember whose we are, and think and act out of the reality of the theological world that is envisioned for us in scripture, we will come again to possess our lives and we will begin to reasonably embody our faith.

For:

God moves in a mysterious way
His wonders to perform;

He plants His footsteps in the sea

And rides upon the storm . . .

Blind unbelief is sure to err,
And scan His work in vain;

God is His own Interpreter
and He will make it plain.¹¹

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11. William Cowper, “Light Shining out of Darkness,” in *Hallelujah: The Poetry of Classic Hymns*, ed. Anna Marlis Burgard (Berkeley, CA: Celestial Arts, 2005).