

READ

Acts 28:1-2

Psalms 76

REFLECT

Last week we studied the terrible storm that accompanied Paul and his fellow travelers on what was supposed to be a short sail from Fair Havens to Phoenix on the island of Crete. Two weeks later, the lost and battered ship finally breaks up on the reef of an unknown island. The hungry and waterlogged travelers wash up on the shore of the island of Malta.

The text tells us that the people of Malta were friendly and generous. They built a huge bonfire and gathered the strangers around it. Living on an island in the center of a well-traveled and unpredictable sea, they may have been accustomed to taking care of shipwreck survivors.

The tiny islands that make up Malta sit in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea. The Maltese people – originally from the Italian island of Sicily – were farmers and ranchers. Six hundred years before the first pyramid in Egypt was built (and 1,000 years before Stonehenge in England), the Maltese built temples from gigantic rocks weighing up to 50 tons each and reaching 18 feet tall!

During Paul's time, the island was controlled by Rome and was a popular retirement destination for Roman soldiers. But Roman soldiers weren't the only military to live on Malta throughout its history. In 1530, Charles I of Spain gave the island to the Order of the Knights of the Hospital of Saint John of Jerusalem. These knights, a religious military order now known as the Knights of Malta, were responsible for caring for poor, sick and injured pilgrims in the Holy Land. Later their duties were expanded to include

defense, and the Knights of Malta participated in (and lost) the First Crusade. Then in 1798 Napoleon Bonaparte famously took advantage of the kind and trusting islanders by pretending to need a safe haven to re-supply his ships. Once in port, he turned his guns on the capital and took over the island for France. Only two years later the British captured the island for a colony, and the islanders finally gained independence in 1964.

RESPOND

Today's reflection might seem more like a travel log than a devotional, but that is what is so cool about studying the Bible. It has inspired me to know more about the people and places that grew our church.

The Bible isn't some fairy tale of made up people and places. I can look at a map and see how close Fair Havens was to Phoenix, and yet how far away it was for Paul and his companions. I can travel to Malta and touch one of the four Roman lead anchors that were found exactly in the location and at the depth described in Acts 27:27-41. I can walk amongst the ruins of the Roman soldiers' "retirement community." I can stand where Paul stood and talk with descendants of the people who gave him comfort on that far away beach. And I can gaze into a bonfire on that beach, feeling the warmth and fellowship that the castaways surely felt.

The Bible is God's history, and it is our history. Today's text, only three sentences long, has inspired an entire week of research and prayer, and ultimately led to a greater knowledge of and respect for God, the Author.

How does Bible study inspire you?

PRAY

We praise You and thank You, God, for the gift of the Bible. Your Word truly is a direct conduit to You. Amen.

READ

Acts 28:3-6

Psalm 77

REFLECT

When Paul bent to gather a pile of brushwood for the bonfire (no job was too small for Paul), he was bitten by a viper.

The Leopard Snake is one of two indigenous snakes to Malta and is credited with being the “viper” that fastened itself on Paul’s hand. These snakes are slightly over one yard in length and are pale brown with dark brown or reddish-black spots (a leopard print). The Leopard Snake often coils itself around tree branches and feeds on birds, lizards, geckos, frogs, mice, rats and other small snakes.

The islanders believed that the gods used nature to punish the wicked; so when they saw a snake attached to Paul’s hand, they assumed he was a murderer. They were amazed that all 276 castaways had made it safely from the shipwreck to the shore, so they figured the snakebite was Justice getting her revenge. But Paul just shook off the snake and suffered no ill effects, not even swelling. The islanders decided he must be a god.

In his first hours on the island, Paul was able to evangelize to the Maltese through signs that proved God’s authority over nature. Paul could have allowed the people to continue in the false belief that he was a god, but he didn’t.

Today over 98% of Maltese are Roman Catholic, with Paul being first and foremost of the patron saints.

RESPOND

The snake is a symbol for everything evil, from Satan to lying and deceit. The snake symbolizes our separation from God through the sin of Adam and Eve (Gen 3).

Yet even the snake was created by God and is a tool in God’s hands. God used the snake to prove His power to Moses (Ex 4:1-5) and again to Pharaoh (Ex 7:8-12). He uses it to punish and to warn us against sin (Deut 32:20-24, 32-33, Ps 140:1-3, and Mat 23:29-33), and He used it to smooth the way for Paul’s ministry in Malta.

Remember that when the Kingdom is restored, so shall mankind and the snake be reconciled with God, as is promised in Isaiah 6-9:

PRAY

The wolf will romp with the lamb,
the leopard sleep with the kid.
Calf and lion will eat from the same trough,
and a little child will tend them.
Cow and bear will graze the same pasture,
their calves and cubs grow up together,
and the lion eat straw like the ox.
The nursing child will crawl over rattlesnake dens,
the toddler stick his hand down the hole of a serpent.
Neither animal nor human will hurt or kill
on my holy mountain.
The whole earth will be brimming the knowing God-Alive,
a living knowledge of God ocean-deep, ocean-wide. Amen.

- C.B.

READ

Acts 28:7-9

Psalm 78

REFLECT

Publius was the head or chief man on that part of the island and welcomed the bedraggled travelers into his home as guests. Publius did not have to host the entire party. His duty would have been to the Roman soldiers only, yet he opened his home to everyone. For three days, the men ate, rested, dried out and regained their strength before moving on to the main city of Melita.

While in Melita, Paul visited Publius' father, who was suffering from fever and dysentery. Publius' father probably had what is now known as Malta fever, which comes from a microorganism found in the milk of Maltese goats. Its symptoms usually last some four months. Paul laid hands on him, prayed; and the man was healed. After that, everyone on the island who was sick came to Paul and was healed.

The text doesn't tell us if the sick were healed by the Holy Spirit or if Paul and Luke (a physician) healed them through the practical application of medicine. What we do know is that *everyone* was healed.

RESPOND

The laying on of hands has its roots in Judaism where it was used to confer a blessing or to transfer authority. Esau was robbed of his inheritance when Isaac blessed his second son Jacob with the laying on of hands (Gen 27). On his deathbed, Moses placed his hands on Joshua to give him honor and the authority to lead the Israelites into the Promised Land

(Deut 34:9). Old Testament priests were ordained through sacrifice and by the laying on of hands (Lev 8). Jesus used the laying on of hands to heal the sick (although he didn't have to use His hands at all), while the Apostles used it to receive the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

Today we use the laying on of hands to confer a blessing, to ask for healing, and to ordain our leaders. When we say goodbye to a co-worker whose family is traveling abroad, we lay our hands on him/her and pray for health and safety and happiness. When our friend is diagnosed with cancer, we lay our hands on our friend and pray for strength and healing. And when we install a new Pastor, all Elders and Deacons (past and present) are invited to come forward to lay their hands on him. This is not an empty ritual but a coming together of God's people to allow the Holy Spirit to do His work through us.

Next time you touch someone with your hand(s), whether it's just to shake hands or to give a hug, think about the power that God has given you to bless that person.

PRAY

Thank You God for sending Your Holy Spirit to us to do Your work. We know that all things are possible with You and through You, so long as we believe. May our hands be Your hands in all that we touch and do. Amen.

- C . B .

READ

Acts 28:10-16

Psalm 79

REFLECT

Luke writes that they spent three *wonderful* months on Malta. [This reminds me of a postcard I once received from a cousin visiting Fiji, “Weather is here, wish you were beautiful.”] There is no mention of Paul preaching or teaching. There are no Chief Priests to hound him; no sneaking away at night. The people treated him royally and took care of all of his needs. He may have been busy healing people, but more likely he was resting and gathering his strength for what was to come. For the first time in a long time, Paul was able to relax.

Everyone, who has vacationed on an island, knows about “island time.” Things move a bit slower, and we have to slow *ourselves* down in order to experience and communicate what is going on around us. Relationships are more important than time. Paul certainly had ample time during his stay on Malta to work on his relationship with God - time to look, see, ask, and listen.

RESPOND

Not everyone can jet off to an island to get away from the daily grind (and we certainly don’t want to be shipwrecked on one). Of course we can pray anywhere, but sometimes we have to make our own private island – a sort of virtual place – where we can focus on God and be still enough to hear His voice.

For me, that place is in my backyard. My mom gave me a teak wood bench the last time she moved. It’s weathered, but sturdy. The bench sits

under a pine tree (a live Christmas tree from 15 years ago) and faces an outdoor fire pit. A wild purple morning glory climbs up one leg and around the arm rest. The best time to sit on this bench is in the early morning, the first hour after sunrise. Everything is fresh and dewy. The birds are pecking the ground for seeds and making the first tentative “chirps” to announce the day. God is present in this place, and I do my best asking and receiving here.

Where and how do you commune with God?

PRAY

Oh God, You made us in Your image so that we might communicate with You. Help us to find that place - whether it is in church, on an island, or in a backyard - where we can focus on You. Thank You for listening to and answering our prayers. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

-C.B.

READ

Acts 28:17-31

Psalm 80

REFLECT

Once Paul left Malta, time seemed to speed up again. In only a matter of a few weeks, he was in Rome arguing with the Jews. They hadn't heard about the trumped-up charges against Paul but *had* heard mostly negative things about this "Christian sect."

They asked Paul to explain it to them, which he did, taking all day, morning to evening. We know he was a persuasive speaker, but he wasn't able to convince the most vocal of the unbelievers. They began to bicker. Finally, in exasperation, Paul interrupted their arguing and recited the words of Isaiah 6:9-10. He concluded with, "You've had your chance. The non-Jewish outsiders are next on the list. And believe me, they're going to receive it with open arms!" Thus began God's great gift to us through Paul. That we, Gentiles (outsiders), could receive salvation.

Paul spent the next two years in his rented house welcoming everyone who came to visit and explaining everything about Jesus Christ. During that time he made friends with people in Caesar's household and struck up a correspondence with Seneca, the philosopher. He wrote letters to the church in Philippi, who in turn supported his ministry financially. He used his imprisonment (albeit in his own home rather than in a dirty jail cell) to spread the Truth.

The text doesn't tell us how Paul was liberated from this house arrest; but it is supposed that no one came forward to support the charges, so he was let go. It is commonly believed that Paul died a martyr's death in A.D. 64

or 65 when Nero had him beheaded along with Peter, who was crucified head down.

RESPOND

The Book of Acts is a plain, simple and straight forward account of the early days of Christianity and is supported by other historical accounts of that time. Not only is it the history of our church, but it is the history of God's grace and providence. Paul brought God's light and salvation where there was darkness and sin.

If Paul could accomplish so much while incarcerated, how much more can we do as free people? Through Bible study, worship and evangelization, we, too, can build the Kingdom.

PRAY

"Reader, magnify thy God and Saviour, who hath called thee to such a *state* of salvation. Should thou *neglect* it, how grievous must thy punishment be! Not only receive its doctrines, as a system of *wisdom* and *goodness*, but receive them as *motives* of conduct, and as a *rule* of life; and show thy conscientious belief of them, by holding the truth *in righteousness*, and thus adorn these doctrines of God thy Saviour in all things.-*Amen.*" (The Adam Clark Commentary).

-Christine Boling