

Jonah: *What the Storm Reveals*  
Jonah 1:4-6; Acts 27:18-25

As we return to the book of Jonah, God has sent a great storm upon the sea. Jonah's disobedience has invoked God's wrath, and the consequences of Jonah's choices are bringing great peril to the sailors onboard the ship. We spent some time unpacking the action in vss. 4-6 in a previous message, but this morning we will return to the ship and look closely at the contrast between Jonah in the storm and the Apostle Paul who endured a very similar storm many years later. My message this morning is largely drawn from several chapters in Hugh Martin's work on Jonah (entitled Jonah), so I want to begin by giving honor where honor is due. I'll only be able to touch a bit of Martin's work here, but I hope you might pick up a copy of his book to read further on these insights in the days to come. So, please stand and let us read Jonah 1:4-6, and then we will read Acts 27:18-25.

4 But the Lord hurled a great wind upon the sea, and there was a mighty tempest on the sea, so that the ship threatened to break up. 5 Then the mariners were afraid, and each cried out to his god. And they hurled the cargo that was in the ship into the sea to lighten it for them. But Jonah had gone down into the inner part of the ship and had lain down and was fast asleep. 6 So the captain came and said to him, "What do you mean, you sleeper? Arise, call out to your god! Perhaps the god will give a thought to us, that we may not perish."

And now Acts: 27:18-25

18 Since we were violently storm-tossed, they began the next day to jettison the cargo. 19 And on the third day they threw the ship's tackle overboard with their own hands. 20 When neither sun nor stars appeared for many days, and no small tempest lay on us, all hope of our being saved was at last abandoned. 21 Since they had been without food for a long time, Paul stood up among them and said, "Men, you should have listened to me and not have set sail from Crete and incurred this injury and loss. 22 Yet now I urge you to take heart, for there will be no loss of life among you, but only of the ship. 23 For this very night there stood before me an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I worship, 24 and he said, 'Do not be afraid, Paul; you must stand before Caesar. And behold, God has granted you all those who sail with you.' 25 So take heart, men, for I have faith in God that it will be exactly as I have been told."

We will look at the contrast between these storms under four subheadings: 1) The Most Dangerous Person in the Boat; 2) The Revelatory Nature of Storms; 3) The Prayers of Heathens; and 4) The Prayers of the Faithful.

### **I. The Most Dangerous Person in the Boat**

One of the main points that we considered in my previous message was this observation made by Timothy Keller: "Every act of disobedience against God has a storm attached to it."<sup>1</sup> The book of Jonah paints a vivid picture of this biblical truth. We learn early on that Jonah, who is a prophet of God, has been called by God to go to Nineveh, the capital city of the ruthless Assyrian Empire, and to cry out against the city because of their great evil. We get the notion that God's justice is imminent, but should the people of Nineveh repent, God may choose to show mercy and spare them the destruction that they deserve.

Shockingly, Jonah refuses to obey God's call. Jonah doesn't reveal why he won't go to Nineveh, nor does he engage God in debate. Jonah simply gets up and heads in the opposite direction of

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<sup>1</sup> Timothy Keller, The Prodigal Prophet, p. 24.

God's will for his life. He goes west instead of east; he goes down instead of up; and his disobedience leads him to board a ship heading to Tarshish...that far off distant land of exotic riches where people have no awareness of God or God's prophets.

Not surprisingly, Jonah's disobedience does not go unnoticed by God. Jonah's disobedience has a storm attached to it, and it's a particularly fierce storm. We learn in vs. 4 that God sends a great wind upon the waters. God pursues Jonah in a mighty tempest, and now those who agreed to take Jonah to Tarshish are in a world of hurt. The Gentile sailors frantically work to save the ship. Each sailor cries out to his own god, and they hurl the cargo over the side of the boat, and yet the storm rages on. Jonah, however, is sound asleep in the cargo hold. Then, in vs. 6, the captain of the ship goes below and wakes Jonah, saying, "What do you mean, you sleeper? Arise, call out to your god! Perhaps the god will give a thought to us, that we may not perish."

We've already made several observations regarding this storm, and one in particular needs repeating: the sinful choices of one person may lead many others to suffer undue harm. Jonah's disobedience has put every man on that ship in harm's way. Now, we should be quick to acknowledge the heathen sailors are not without sin. They are not innocent by any stretch. Yet, whereas God may have sent no great storm upon the sea for the common sin of unbelieving heathen, this unusual, unseasonal tempest is clearly the result of Jonah's disobedience. Jonah...a man of God who is running from God...is now a hazard to many. The one and only true believer is actually the most dangerous man on the boat.

One of the most famous works on Jonah was written by a great preacher and thinker named Hugh Martin. Martin rightly observes what is stated clearly in Ecc. 9:18, "One sinner destroys much good." He goes on to write:

One backsliding saint may destroy even more good and originate more evil. For God pursues with much sharpness and severity His erring people. He can let His enemies alone; but He must, in ever love, chastise and correct His sons—even at the risk of judgment that may swiftly involve many around them, and terminate to many their day of grace and probation. God must chastise His children...hence, whether from Satan's devouring malice or God's correcting chastisement, a saint in rebellion is, in some respects, a more dangerous inmate of a house, or congregation, or community, than a sinner—more likely to prove a center of danger, a source of calamity to many.<sup>2</sup>

King David is a perfect example of what Martin is referring to. David was God's anointed one. While David was still a boy, God sent the prophet Samuel to anoint him as the future king of Israel. God had great plans for David. So, when King David fell into sin by taking another man's wife and having her husband killed, God pursued David with a horrific storm of consequences. Amazingly, not unlike Jonah, David did not immediately recognize God's pursuit. David was asleep to the tempest caused by his sin. He was self-deceived that he could sin against God and somehow get away with it. So, God sent the prophet Nathan to confront David with the ever so famous words, "You are the man." God made it clear that David was responsible for all the horrible consequences that were now taking place, including the death of his firstborn son. It took a storm for David to see his sin and repent, but many others suffered longstanding consequences because of David's sin. That's often how it works. Those closest to

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<sup>2</sup> Hugh Martin, Jonah, (Geneva Series Commentary--Banner of Truth Publishers; 1995), p. 81.

God are those who cause the most damage for the greatest number of people when they rebel against God. Sadly, we've seen far too many contemporary examples of that truth locally and throughout our nation.

Church, let us never *assume* that we are not the cause for the storm that is around us, be that in our family, our church, our workplace or our friend group. Far too often we measure ourselves against the "sinners" on the boat, and we think, "Well, at least I'm not as bad as those people." Perhaps that is true. Perhaps you are the only true believer on board your ship.

Even so, we must acknowledge that the unbelieving Gentiles on this ancient boat are in harm's way because the only true believer on the boat named Jonah is on the run from God! If Jonah was not rebelling against God, these sailors, though sinful pagans and unbelievers, would not be in the mess they are in. As believers, we need to own our part in the storms that our disobedience provokes. As Martin writes:

Let it not be forgotten that a single individual may be a source of calamity to multitudes; and that this may result the more surely and extensively as that individual is more closely connected with the cause and kingdom of the Lord.<sup>3</sup>

The story of Jonah shows us that when believers run from God...when we who know better are blatantly disobedient...when those who once claimed sonship turn and attempt to flee from the presence of the Lord, we are guilty of a particular brand of disobedience that has attached to it a particular kind of storm, and often that fierce storm comes from the hand of a loving and persistent Father that is not content to let us fall away in disobedience. The storm is an act of God's loving righteousness and mercy, but it is a storm that inflicts others with untimely suffering due to our disobedience. Again, God is using that storm in 10,000 ways that we can't possibly know or comprehend, and no one on any boat anywhere is "innocent." God is just and brilliant in the way that He uses storms for everyone on the boat; but even so, let us acknowledge that believers draw a particular fierceness of storm when they run from God. Our particular disobedience as believers can make us the most dangerous people on the ship.

Now, the flipside of that observation is also worth noting. When we look to Paul, who is a believer living in costly obedience to God, his faith makes him the most powerful man on the ship! Paul will rise up and speak courage in the midst of the storm. His unshakeable faith will give him credibility and positional leadership even though he boarded that ship as a prisoner of Rome. Storms reveal the nature of our relationship to God, and thus our relationship to the unbelievers in our boat. That leads us to our second subheading...

## **II. The Revelatory Nature of Storms**

Storms are revelatory...storms reveal things that are otherwise hidden. We can observe this tendency in our text when we look to the heathen sailors. We should not think that these men spent a great deal of time musing about theology! These were not likely "religious" men, per se. And yet, when the storm comes, they cry out to their gods in desperation. That is because

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<sup>3</sup> Martin, p. 77.

the storm has revealed some essential truths that we would do well to remember before the storm strikes.

The first thing that storms reveal is our appropriate smallness. My dad sailed around the world twice with the United States Navy. His ship was an aircraft carrier called the U.S.S. Enterprise<sup>4</sup> (show pic)...not to be confused with the space craft known by the same name from the show Star Trek<sup>5</sup> (show pic)! I don't know if you've ever seen or been close to an aircraft carrier, but I have, and they are HUGE (show pic of Enterprise)! The USS Enterprise sits over six stories above the waterline; yet my dad remembers more than one occasion when the waves at sea broke over the deck of their ship! Anyone who has spent much time at sea will tell you that your boat is never big enough, particularly in a storm.

As we think about the story of Jonah, the boat<sup>6</sup> (show pic) now being crushed under the waves in the angry Mediterranean Sea is surely much smaller than an aircraft carrier, and the heathen sailors are appropriately fearful. The billowing waves reveal their smallness and the fragility of their mortal lives. Everything of material value now pales in comparison to saving the souls of the men on board. The text says they hurled everything they could over the side. No matter how precious the cargo; no matter how sacred the idols; every material possession was counted worthless as compared to the souls on board that ship. This is another truth revealed in the storm: souls matter more than possessions. Souls matter more than policy. Souls matter more than anything else because souls are eternal. Jesus once asked, “<sup>36</sup> For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul? <sup>37</sup> For what can a man give in return for his soul? (Matthew 8:36-37).

Sadly, when we are not in the midst of a storm, we tend to have very short memories, and we forget our ‘smallness.’ When we can control the temperature in our homes; when the darkness can be overcome by artificial light; when food can be stored in refrigerators and freezers; when we don't risk the elements and wild predators by walking every day in the wilderness; when we can get antibiotics and first-class medical treatment; we tend to forget how fragile we are. We forget what's really important. We get wrapped up in the pursuit of dollars and possessions. We “kill time” indulging in recreation and entertainment. We devote our best thinking to planning our next trip or dreaming about our next investment.

Storms interrupt all of that. When we are beset by a storm, we quickly realize that we have very little control. We come face to face with our fragility. We become aware that there are far greater forces at work...forces we cannot predict or control. Our eyes look to God, who is all-powerful, the only One who is greater than the storm. But it is then that we also remember...no matter who we are...that we are souls accountable to our Creator. We cannot

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[https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/0/0a/USS\\_Enterprise\\_%28CVN-65%29\\_underway\\_in\\_the\\_Atlantic\\_Ocean\\_on\\_14\\_June\\_2004\\_%28040614-N-0119G-020%29.jpg/1280px-USS\\_Enterprise\\_%28CVN-65%29\\_underway\\_in\\_the\\_Atlantic\\_Ocean\\_on\\_14\\_June\\_2004\\_%28040614-N-0119G-020%29.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/0/0a/USS_Enterprise_%28CVN-65%29_underway_in_the_Atlantic_Ocean_on_14_June_2004_%28040614-N-0119G-020%29.jpg/1280px-USS_Enterprise_%28CVN-65%29_underway_in_the_Atlantic_Ocean_on_14_June_2004_%28040614-N-0119G-020%29.jpg)

<sup>5</sup> [https://hips.hearstapps.com/pop.h-cdn.co/assets/16/26/4000x2666/gallery-1467144815-starshipenterprise.jpg?resize=1200:\\*](https://hips.hearstapps.com/pop.h-cdn.co/assets/16/26/4000x2666/gallery-1467144815-starshipenterprise.jpg?resize=1200:*)

<sup>6</sup> <https://scripturalthinking.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/Navigational-Voyages-in-the-Bible.jpg>

help but feel that we now stand at the mercy of the Great Judge...which is why we so often try to bargain with God in the midst of the storm, right? We make promises of what we will do to please the Judge if he will deliver us from the storm we are in.

This tendency is true for all people. Storms are the great equalizers. Every person on the ship, battered and beaten by the waves, is a soul that needs saving regardless of net worth, skin color, education, or status. In the heart of the storm, material things mean nothing. Salvation means everything. Such is the time that we cry out to God...we all do.

In Psalm 107 we read:

23 Some went down to the sea in ships,  
doing business on the great waters;  
24 they saw the deeds of the Lord,  
his wondrous works in the deep.  
25 For he commanded and raised the stormy wind,  
which lifted up the waves of the sea.  
26 They mounted up to heaven; they went down to the depths;  
their courage melted away in their evil plight;  
27 they reeled and staggered like drunken men  
and were at their wits' end.  
28 Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble,  
and he delivered them from their distress.  
29 He made the storm be still,  
and the waves of the sea were hushed.  
30 Then they were glad that the waters were quiet,  
and he brought them to their desired haven.  
31 Let them thank the Lord for his steadfast love,  
for his wondrous works to the children of man!

Psalm 107 recounts how God rescued His own from the desert wastelands, from imprisonment, from starvation, and from the storms at sea. Vs. 2 states, "Let the redeemed of the LORD say so, whom He has redeemed from trouble!"

Storms are the context for redemption. In fact, storms not only provide an opportunity for salvation; storms also reveal those who are saved.

When we look to another storm in Acts 27, the Apostle Paul stands out amongst all those on the ship as the one who is saved. The text tells us that after several days of being ravaged by a horrific storm at sea, having tossed over everything they could to lighten the ship, the crew has lost all hope. Only Paul remains hopeful because only Paul knows the one, true God. However, unlike Jonah, Paul is not running from God. Paul is in the center of obedience. In fact, it's his obedience to God's call...not his disobedience...that has led him to be on a boat full of pagan sailors in the midst of a horrible storm. We learn earlier in the narrative that Paul, as a result of prayer, had warned the crew that this journey would lead to a horrible storm, but the captain and the Roman soldier in charge of the trip would not yield to his advice. Thus, Paul now finds himself in a storm not of his own making, but Paul is not worried about his salvation...Paul's

faith is secure. His confidence in the LORD is unshaken. Paul gathers the crew and assures them that God is with them and that not one soul will perish.

We will come back to Paul in a minute, but let me ask you a question: when crisis strikes, when the storm comes, what will be revealed of you? What will be revealed of us as a community of believers? No matter how insulated you are, no matter how much money you make, no matter how safe you live your life...there's a storm coming, that's for certain. People you love are going to die. Your body is going to age...things will break, get infected, stop working. People are going to sin against you, betray you, unfairly accuse you...you will suffer injustice. Storms are inevitable. So...what will the storm reveal of you? What will the storm reveal of us?

Church, I have walked with many souls from this congregation through HORRIFIC storms for the past 16 years. ALS, cancer, strokes, dementia, lawsuits, affairs, divorce, the death of a child, suicides, joblessness, sexual assault, murder, prison sentences...many, many storms. And what we see here in Jonah and the book of Acts is consistently true. Storms reveal our fragility and the infinite value of souls, and storms reveal our faith. You will soon realize what you truly believe by the way you pray in the midst of the storm, and that leads us to our third subheading.

### **III. The Prayers of Heathens**

In his work on Jonah, Hugh Martin boldly asserts that there are only two classes of people in the world: those who truly know Christ, and heathens! He writes:

Whether among heathens or merely nominal Christians, natural religion is substantially the same; in other words, that without converting and enlightening and renewing grace, without the evangelism and spirituality of the gospel, without the blood and Spirit of Christ, man's religion, anywhere and everywhere, is essentially heathen.

Martin points out that heathen or natural religion (which accounts for the vast majority of religions in the world) is based upon those conclusions about God that can be drawn from reason. These conclusions are helpful but very limited and altogether insufficient...particularly when we find ourselves in the storm.

Martin submits that from the earliest recorded history of man, we find that tribes and people groups everywhere have always discerned certain truths about God's existences.

First, the ancients in every culture discerned that there is a god behind nature, and though they may have imagined many gods for all the various geographies and people groups, the ancients generally held that there is only one Supreme Being who is ultimately over and responsible for the created order.<sup>7</sup>

The second key observation about God was that this Supreme Being is capable of communicating with His creatures. This principle was based on the assumption that the Creator

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<sup>7</sup> Martin writes, "[Natural religion] may tell us that there is a God, and that God is One. There were 'gods many,' according to the mariner's views. And yet under this multiplicity there lurked the idea of a unity also...that seems to indicate that...out of the many they re-constructed and rose to the idea of the single Supreme Being...that God 'will think upon us, that we not perish,' p. 112.

cannot confer powers or privileges on His creatures higher than He himself possesses. So, because men can see and hear and converse, so also God is able to see, hear, and converse.

Martin writes:

For if I, God's creature, can reveal my mind and thoughts to you, and am capable of receiving the revelation of your thoughts, and wants, and wishes, which in turn you make to me; assuredly God, who made us both, must much more be capable of disclosing His mind to both of us, and hearing us when we go to disclose our mind to Him. Hence, reason itself demonstrates the possibility of revelation from God; and the possibility of prayer, and of the efficacy of prayer.<sup>8</sup>

Martin suggests that the third attribute of God discerned by the ancients, largely based upon moral conscience, was that there was One Judge<sup>9</sup> to whom all created beings were morally accountable.

So, to summarize natural religion based upon reason, observation, and the human conscience, we have these three convictions: 1) there is a Supreme Being behind the forces of nature; 2) the Supreme Being can communicate with his creatures; and 3) the Supreme Being is the One Judge to whom all creatures are morally accountable.

Now...the captain of Jonah's ship is the poster child for natural religion when he commands Jonah to "Arise, call out to your god! Perhaps the god will give a thought to us, that we may not perish."

The pagan captain believes that a god is there; he believes that the god will hear the cry of Jonah; and he has hope that by crying out to the god, the god who stands as the One Judge might rule in their favor and save the ship and the crew from destruction.

Now, the downside of natural religion is obvious: reason, or natural religion, cannot tell us who that God is, what that God is like, or how we can enter into a relationship with that God. Reason and observation of the natural world will never be able to provide those answers. For us to know anything about who God is and what God is like and how we can be in a relationship with our Creator requires something other than reason...it requires revelation. God must reveal Himself to us in a more specific way.

So, let's go back to the ship...let's return to the storm. The heathen are confronted with their smallness by the towering waves and gusting winds. They believe that there is a god behind the storm, and they cry out to their gods. They cry out in the hope that the god will hear their prayers and have a change of heart. In other words, apart from knowing who God is...apart from knowing God's character...apart from knowing the nature of God's love, mercy, righteousness, and grace...the heathen prayer is simply a desperate prayer that attempts to make God favorable towards those who are perishing.

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<sup>8</sup> Martin, p. 114.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 113.

Martin writes: [Apart from scripture and gospel], I am incapable of true prayer; my prayer is simply heathen. I cry to a Supreme Being, perhaps—it may be in a very agony of earnestness; but mark the tremendous error of my prayer. I pray in order to make God favorable. And this is a work too great for me. This is a work in which I can have no success. This is the aim and object of all sacrifices, penances, and prayers of heathen worship. With this intent [to make God favorable], with this end in view, a heathen pilot prays, and calls the prophet to prayer. And with this same end, every awakened, startled, unconverted, unbelieving man prays, whether a heathen or a nominal Christian.

I want you to think deeply and carefully about what Martin just said. The prayer of the heathen is an attempt to make God favorable to us. It's that promise we make in a crisis, that if God will rescue us from our predicament we will go back to church and try to be a good person. It's that promise that if God rescues our marriage, we will never drink another drop of alcohol. It's our desperate apology and constant pleading for God's intervention, as if by our pleading God's mind might be changed...that His countenance might turn favorable...that He may finally relent of His anger and show us mercy. The prayer of the heathen is honest and desperate, but it bears little resemblance to the prayer of faith...the prayer of one who truly knows and trusts the God who has revealed Himself in scripture. Church, when we find ourselves in the storm, let us not engage in the prayers of heathens. Instead, let us pray, in faith, to the God we know, to the God we trust, to the God who has revealed His nature and already saved our souls, come what may! And that leads us to our fourth and final subheading...

#### **IV. The Prayers of the Faithful**

When we look at Paul in the storm, we see a man who has unshakeable confidence in God. Paul does not simply believe that there is a god behind the storm who can hear him when he prays. Paul knows and is known by the God behind the storm. Such is why Paul does not feel any need to cry out to God in fear and desperation, begging God to look favorably upon him and to deliver him and his shipmates from his circumstances. Paul demonstrates a radically different kind of prayer. Paul's prayers are a declaration of his confidence in the God that he knows—a God that has redeemed Paul's soul through the forgiveness of his sins. Paul has confidence in the God who showed His love for us in this: *that while we were yet sinners and enemies of God, Christ died for us*. Paul's prayer is a declaration of his faith in God's steadfast love and mercy. Paul does not pray in an attempt to make God favorable; Paul prays because he intimately knows the favor of God through God's unmerited grace and election. Paul's salvation is revealed in the storm through his prayers when all hope seems lost. Paul stands up in the midst of impossible circumstances and states, "Take heart, men, for I have faith in God that it will be exactly as I have been told."

Church, Paul's faith is not limited by reason and observations of the natural world. Paul's faith is rooted in God's specific revelation through His Word. Paul's faith is not that there is a god, but that God has made Himself known through Jesus, and consequently we know that He is a God who is just, merciful, loving, gracious, all-powerful, and faithful...He is a God who gets into the storm with us, who is on the boat with us. He is a God who can be trusted, no matter how violent the storm.



As I reflect upon the many storms I've walked through with people in this church, I must tell you that I've seen this Paul-like, unwavering faith in the prayers and testimonies of so many people. I've watched my brothers and sisters in Christ, ravaged by ALS or cancer, smile and say, "Why not me? May God be glorified in my life, and in my death. In all things, may God be glorified." I've seen people endure unthinkable loss, and though their hearts were broken and their lives forever changed, they stood in the midst of the storm and said, "I have faith in God that it will be exactly what we have been told. Death doesn't win; the tomb is empty; and we will be together again. To God be the glory." Nothing is as compelling as the prayer of the faithful in the heart of the storm.

Storms are real and they are painful, but storms also serve as opportunities. Storms reveal who we are and whose we are. Storms, particularly those horrible storms, will cause all people to pray. Yet in the heart of that storm, we will either pray as heathens in attempt to make God favorable, or we will pray as those who have already been saved by a God who showed us unmerited favor. How will you pray? I will close with a final quote from Hugh Martin:

If you would avoid being at heart altogether as the heathen, there is no course for you but one. Awake to a sense of sin, and of your tremendous yet glorious responsibility to God; and come in truth of heart to the cross of Christ's humiliation, agony, and shame—His vicarious sufferings and death. There you must, by faith, unite your responsibility with Christ's, or take His for yours. Your guilt—your righteous liability to wrath, you must terminate and quench in His blood; your Judge by that blood appeased, your Father by that blood reconciled. And in the unlimited brokenness and gratitude of heart which will thus be inspired; in the perfect trust in God and adoring admiration of Him; in the fervor of thanks which you render at the remembrance of His holiness, and the reverence of filial joy with which you contemplate and share His love; you will feel a new life begun, a life of prayer, the prayer not of probability, of doubt, of hesitation, of timid shrinking, creeping fear and bondage; the prayer, not of abject flattery, of craven cringing, of laboring to propitiate, or persuading to cease from wrath; but of faith, of the full assurance of faith, of access with boldness and confidence through the faith of Christ. For "this is the confidence that we have in Him, that, if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us; and if we know that He hears us, whatsoever we ask, we know that we have the petitions we desired of Him (1 John 5:14-15).<sup>10</sup>

Church, the storm is coming. Now is the time to prepare. Now is the time to seek the Lord, to know the Lord, and to trust the Lord, so that we might stand and shine brightly as the light of Christ when it matters most. Let us pray.

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<sup>10</sup> Martin, pp. 121-122.