

Castaways and Hospitality

by Erica Stoltzfus and Carol Duerksen

FAITH STORY:

Acts 27:1- 39, 28:1-15

FAITH FOCUS:

The ship that Paul is sailing on to Rome gets shipwrecked on the island of Malta. While building a fire, Paul gets bitten by a viper, leading the local people to think he's a murderer, but then he lives through it, which makes them think he is a god. The people show great hospitality: first they make a fire for the cold and wet strangers and then the leader, Publius, invites them to his house. Paul heals Publius' father, which leads to the healing of many others. The shipwrecked group leaves three months later and travels to Rome with no further delay. Christian believers from Rome meet Paul at the Forum of Appius and Three Taverns.

MATERIALS AND ADVANCE PREPARATION:

- Refreshments
- Bibles
- Dry erase board and marker

SESSION OUTLINE

FOCUS:

Welcome students and enjoy the refreshments together. Talk about some of the best times they have had, sharing food with others—either when the students were hosting or when someone else was hosting them. Discuss: *What made it fun? Was it the quality or the quantity of the food? Was it the people they were with? Was it the attitude of the people they were with? For example, would they rather eat a meal with friends in a grumpy mood or with happy people that they don't know?*

CONNECT:

Say: Hospitality is a gift. Some people do it more naturally than others. They know how to entertain others. But even though it is a gift and easier for some, it is something that God wants all of us to be: God wants us to be hospitable to others. We are to have an attitude of hospitality. Today's story is about hospitality that went both ways between Paul and some people he met when he was shipwrecked on an island.

EXPLORE THE BIBLE:

This is a long, but interesting passage about a trip on the sea that went wrong. Divide the passage into these three sections and assign a group of students to each section. Ask them to read their passage and be prepared to answer the questions.

Acts 27: verses 1-12

Who warned who about what?

Who did the centurion listen to? Why?

Why did they risk going out to sea?

Verses 13-26

Do any of you know anything about sailing? Do you understand the conditions described in these verses?

Paul says: "I told you so." But then he offers encouragement. Do you think the other people on the ship believed him?

Verses 27-38:

The sailors were thinking only of themselves and hoping to save themselves by getting into a small boat and heading for shore. What did Paul do?

Why had the people not eaten for 14 days? What did Paul say about that? What did he do about it?

Bring the group together and discuss the following verses as a whole group: Verses 39- 28:16.

- 1 Pick out actions that show hospitality: How did the Maltese deal with a shipwrecked crew and captives? What about Publius? What did the Roman Christians do when they heard Paul was coming?
- 2 According to the examples in the story, write a definition for hospitality. What is it exactly? (Hospitality is meeting the needs of others.)
- 3 How did Paul respond to Maltese hospitality? Publius' hospitality? Roman Christians' hospitality? What does this add to our definition of hospitality? (Hospitality is a give and take relationship. In some way, each party is both a giver and a receiver.)

- 4 Paul never preached the gospel to the people of Malta. Is this okay? Did he just leave them in the dark? How does this add to our understanding of hospitality? (Hospitality itself can be a witness – it is an example of Christian love to others.)

APPLY & RESPOND:

Discuss: How can we as a group show hospitality to our church body or the larger community? Brainstorm ideas.

Examples:

Host a meal for the church, not a fundraiser, but a gift to them. Pay for it out of your own pockets.

Perform a play or host a movie night for the neighbors around your church. This is not “evangelism,” —just doing something nice because you love Jesus and Jesus loves everyone.

Pick a church from a different denomination and host them for a meal with your church.

Think about a group of people that you don’t normally relate to and talk about ways you could share hospitality with them. Choose one or more of the activities and make plans to carry them out.

*Note: If you’re thinking: “Oh no. We’re all super busy – we don’t have time to add another activity to our schedules!” consider these two ideas: 1) maybe do some “hospitality events” instead of a service project; and 2) remember that people learn best by actually doing something. The potential for this lesson to be remembered is greater if there are some activities connected to it.

INSIGHTS FROM THE SCRIPTURE:

Malta is an island in the Mediterranean Sea, just south of Sicily. The name “Malta” comes from the Semetic “Melita” which means “refuge” or “safety.” The word used for the natives is “barbarians.” However, in Latin, this is simply the word for a foreigner, anyone who is not a Roman. Today there are no poisonous snakes on Malta; no one knows what happened to them.

The guest/host relationship was very important in ancient times. In Latin, the word for host and guest is the same word – implying that the relationship is mutual. It was expected that strangers would open their houses or tents to strangers; often this was necessary for survival in the ancient world. Sometimes even enemies would cast aside their differences to participate in the ritual of the guest/host relationship.

There is an ancient Greek poem that is very similar to what happened to Paul on Malta. There was a murderer who escaped a storm at sea, was shipwrecked, and finally killed by a viper. This showed that the murderer did not get away with his wrongdoing; justice was upheld. The natives of Malta were probably thinking of this story when Paul was bitten by a viper and then didn’t even suffer any ill effects.

This is not the only time Paul is taken for a god. In Acts 10 Cornelius tries to worship Paul, but he protests, saying that he is but a man. In Lystra (Acts 14) Paul is first taken for a god and then later the people change their minds and want to kill him.

Healing is a major idea in this story. Jesus' ministry was also marked by performing physical healings, also often with the laying on of hands. Miracles were only performed, however, if the Spirit gave the okay. Some commentators think that Luke (who was with Paul at this time—note the pronoun "us") also helped heal people by using his skills as a physician, while others say that it was not even a vague possibility.

Paul and the others on the ship must have been traveling during the winter months, which was very dangerous. Thus they were shipwrecked. However, there were other ships who wintered at Malta, and it was likely on one of these that Paul continued toward Rome. The Twin Brothers who were the figurehead for this ship were Pollux and Castor, sons of Zeus and the founders of Italy, which they came upon by boat. Therefore, they are seen as good luck for sailors.

There was a Christian church in Rome before Paul got there, although he was the first apostle to visit them. The Roman Christians knew Paul because he had written to them about five years prior. They honor Paul by making a long trip to the Forum of Appius (or the Three Taverns) to meet him on his way to Rome.

In Rome, Paul is put under house arrest although it seems that other people can come visit him. This is also an honor for a prisoner. It is in Rome that Paul writes to Philemon and the Colossians. However, it is unknown when or how he leaves.

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

Barclay, William. **The Acts of the Apostles**. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1955.

Faw, Chalmer E. **Believers Church Bible Commentary: Acts**. Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1993.

Hershberger, Michelle. **A Christian View of Hospitality**. Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1999.

Lenski, RCH. **Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles**. Columbus, OH: Wartburg Press, 1944.

Munck, Johannes. **The Acts of the Apostles**. New York: The Anchor Bible Doubleday, 1967.