Have you ever felt like just giving up? Like the odds were just too great against you that any positive outcome would appear? I suspect we all have felt that at times. Now I am not going to say anything about the recently concluded baseball season—perhaps for obvious reasons—Miguel Cabrera’s MVP award notwithstanding. But anyone who casts even a casual eye to the world of baseball might remember last year’s World Series between the Texas Rangers and the St. Louis Cardinals. Texas was up 3 games to 2 and went to the bottom of the 9th of Game 6 with a 7-5 lead. With two outs and a one ball two strikes count against David Freese, the batter, the Rangers were a single strike away from winning their first World Series in their history. The odds were stacked incredibly against St. Louis at that point. But Freese drove the next pitch deep to right just over the outstretched glove of the right fielder for a triple scoring the two runners on base to tie the game at 7, sending the game into extra innings.

In the 10th inning, the Rangers came back with All-Star centerfielder Josh Hamilton hitting a two-run homer to put Texas back up 9-7. In the bottom of the 10th, the Cardinals were again down to their last strike—two outs, two strikes on the batter, trailing by the two runs-- when Lance Berkman slapped a single to plate the runners on 2nd and 3rd, again tying the game at 9. Never in World Series history had a team TWICE been down to their last strike in successive innings only to come through to stave off defeat. With the score still tied 9-9 in the bottom of the 11th, David Freese who tied the game in 9th again came to the plate. The rest, as they say, is HISTORY. Freese hit a walk-off HR to centerfield to win Game 6, tying the Series at 3-3, with the Cardinals going on to take Game 7 and win their 11th World Series Championship. Again, against all odds, the Cardinals were able to snatch victory from the jaws of defeat.

That was obviously “only a game”. But many people pass through such periods of hopelessness in their own lives, while others very existence day in, day out, is one that is lived against all odds. The Apostle Paul’s life was some of BOTH. Second Corinthians 11: 23-27 narrates a long litany of hardships and persecutions that Paul faced, the pinnacle of which is probably verse. 26 where EIGHT times he uses the word DANGER!! “I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own people, in danger from Gentiles, in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea and in danger from false believers.” Of all these there is perhaps no more detailed account of his dangers than that at sea which we read about in Acts 27.

Paul became a prisoner for the sake of preaching the Gospel. But as a Roman citizen, he appealed his case to the Caesar in Rome. So the entire chapter 27 of Acts, all 44 verses narrates this journey from Palestine to Rome—actually the chapter only takes us as far as the island of Malta. The rest of Paul’s journey from Malta to Rome is taken up in the first half of the concluding chapter 28 of Acts.
Having just been out to New York city a week ago in the relief efforts in the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy, v.14 of Acts 27 seemed strangely apropos with the description of “a wind of hurricane force, called a Northeaster” or NOR’EASTER as they say out New England way. Can you imagine being on a BOAT in the midst of such a storm? We have all seen the pictures, heard the stories, listened to the testimonies of how devastating it was for Sandy to crash against the New Jersey shore, Staten Island and the southern waterfront neighborhoods of Queens, Brooklyn and the south shore of Long Island. These locales were all very hard-hit, but nonetheless they were still on terra firma, solid ground. But think what it must have been like for Paul and his traveling companions in a small wooden ship, buffeted by the winds, tossed like a bobbing cork on the raging, churning waters of the Mediterranean Sea. The pinnacle of calamity—or better put, the depths of despair—occurs in verse 20, the last one we read. “When neither sun nor stars appeared for many days and the storm continued raging, we finally gave up all hope of being saved.” (Acts. 27:20)

This is HOPE Sunday. Hope in many ways can be an abstract concept. As a single word, it is hard to get our heads around it. If life is going relatively well for you, HOPE may not carry a lot of weight for you. So it occurred to me that HOPE has its greatest strength, its most robust meaning in situations that, to the contrary seem HOPE-less! That’s the way it was for Paul and his nautical traveling team. It certainly felt that way for the good doctor, Luke, the author of Acts who was with Paul at the time and writes the vivid details from a first person account. “WE finally gave up all HOPE of being saved.”

Have you ever been there? Do you know what that feels like? I’m not talking about being in a literal storm on the sea—though I know that there are enough sailors and boaters out there, that you probably could narrate for yourselves some pretty harrowing experiences. But maybe it’s a family relational situation; perhaps your own marriage has been ready to crash upon the rocks. Maybe you have been there vocationally, the long job transition with one close door after another, another rejection letter in the mail. Maybe you kids at school have tried and tried to make a real friend, but for whatever reason you almost always feel lonely, like the odd man out, or the girl that always gets teased. Maybe you put your very best effort into it and could still barely pull a passing grade in math. Maybe algebra did you in. Only when we feel HOPELESS does HOPE really mean anything to us.

Humanly speaking—especially from an American perspective--Life in Congo can look pretty hopeless. It would appear that all the odds are against them. Over the last few weeks, including today, you have seen the pictures and heard the numbers—187th out of 187—Dead last on the UN Human Development index. But the last impression I would want to give you of Congo from having lived there for 5+ years—my wife having grown up there, our kids both having been born there—is that the aura of “doom and gloom” pervades the land. To the contrary, in spite of their poverty, the Congolese are both people of Faith and people of Joy. In that sense, WE have MUCH to learn from THEM. Covenant Kids Congo is NOT a one directional partnership, where we do all the giving. Rather our lives are also enriched by theirs through this relationship.
One of the things that gives me great HOPE for Congo is the way the church there continues to grow. I think I had used an older membership number of 180,000 members in the Covenant church of Congo. In fact that number is well over 200,000, numerically larger than the Covenant in the United States in an area not much larger than that of the state of Michigan. In Congo, they have what are known as BIG Sundays, quarterly regional weekend gatherings of all the churches in a given district, at which time they do all of their baptisms. It is not uncommon that the churches from a region like the Greater Detroit Area would baptize 60, 80 or over 100 converts. How can you help but be people of HOPE in the face of such faith?!

As for JOY, it is always evident in their worship from the get go. Call and Response is very big in Congo, where in a wide variety of contexts and expressions, the leader or the preacher will call out one thing while the people knowingly shout their response. At the beginning of worship they will often greet one another

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Leader</th>
<th>People</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mbote! (Hello!)</td>
<td>Mbote! (Hello!)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mbote lisisu! (Hello, again!)</td>
<td>Mbote! (Hello!)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oyo ya misato! (The third time!)</td>
<td>Esengo kati na Nkolo Yesu! (Joy in the Lord Jesus!)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

So as we enter into this partnership with Covenant Kids Congo, if God is calling you to sponsor a child, don’t do it just because you feel sorry for them. But rather do so because it is the right thing. Do so because you have been blessed to be a blessing. Do so because you are willing to also learn from the children of Congo.

Coming back to Paul in Acts 27, God met him and those on board his storm-tossed ship in the midst of their despair. Paul gathers them all together and addresses them, picking it up in v.23, “Last night an angel of the God whose I am and whom I serve stood before me and said, ‘Do not be afraid, Paul. You must stand trial before Caesar and God has graciously given you the lives of ALL who sail with you.’ So keep up your courage, men, for I have faith in God that it will happen just as he told me.”

Now they still shipwreck, but as promised, there is no loss of life. But if you read the rest of the chapter, it is high drama—really one of the best movie scripts from the Bible that I have actually never seen played out on the Big Screen. The ship is driven by the wind to an unknown piece of land, that proves to be the island of Malta. Before actually reaching land, it runs aground on a sand bar, the ship breaking up in pieces. Some on board know how to swim, and they make for shore. Others who never got a chance to take swim lessons at their neighborhood YMCA are grabbing pieces of wood—anything that will keep them afloat and save them from drowning. AGAINST ALL ODDS, not a single life is lost. The last line of chapter 27 puts it succinctly. “In this way, everyone reached land safely.” Against all odd, God saved them all.

The odds are set against the kids of NW Congo. The statistical odds for them living long and good lives do not bode well. With one or two small word changes, Acts 27:20 could have been written about the kids of Congo. “When neither sun nor stars
appeared for many days—that is YEARS!—and the storm continued raging—the storm of DISEASE, of WAR, of POVERTY—we finally gave up all hope of being saved."

But that’s where God’s people show up bringing HOPE. Together with Covenanters across the US and Canada, we stand in a strategic position to save the lives of in excess of 10,000 kids of Congo. In spite of the shipwrecked nature of their economic and developmental infrastructure, we are able to help them all reach shore safely. For $40/month, we are each given the opportunity to sponsor a child. --That is less than the cost of a daily small cup of coffee out at most places these days. --It is less than the cost of a weekly Meal Deal for you and your beloved at the most modest of fast-food restaurants. --And it is less than what many might spend for a monthly dinner out for two at a bit nicer restaurant. Any way you crunch the numbers, for that child you are providing for 1) Clean water, 2) Basic nutrition, 3) Access to Immunizations & Health Care, 4) Education through school fees and materials and 5) Economic opportunity through small loans and micro-financing.

The only thing parents in Congo want is what any of us want for our kids—to be able to grow up with food on the table. To not be threatened by childhood disease or malnutrition. To be able to go to school, without having to pick which of your kids you can afford to send, and which simply need to stay home to work in the family garden or care for younger siblings. To not have to walk a mile or more to carry water from a source that may or may not even be clean. To have a chance someday to make a living and have a family of their own.

[Invitation to sponsor a Covenant Kids Congo child through World Vision. Opportunity extended to Sunday, Nov. 25 & Dec. 2, or check with the church office.]

No matter what the storm of life you may be currently facing, may whatever sense of hopelessness you might feel be turned to true HOPE through faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. And may you be people of HOPE for others, esp. for the Covenant Kids of Congo, through your prayers and through your sponsorship.

Let’s pray!