

“Be strong and courageous”

Joshua 1:1-9

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This morning we are going to explore the theme of courage. Specifically, we are going to explore the theme of courage in the life of one particular individual, because God calls one particular individual to be courageous. That one particular individual is the Old Testament figure named Joshua. God says to Joshua, “Be strong and courageous.” But as with all things biblical, the words spoken to one particular individual, in this case Joshua, are words that echo and resonate in the hearts of all the faithful, in the hearts of all the ones who follow, in the hearts of all the ones who seek, in the hearts of all the ones who wrestle, in the hearts of all the ones who grapple, in the hearts of all the ones who question and doubt and wonder and worry...and in the hearts of all the ones who trust and surrender and obey and serve. In other words, these very words spoken to Joshua are words that are spoken to us. “Be strong and courageous.”

When do we need courage? After a death? So did Joshua. The book of Joshua begins with these words. “After the death of Moses...” Have you ever experienced the death of a loved one? Have you ever sat in a dark room, an empty room, your heart filled with loneliness, longing for the one who passed, missing them terribly, and wondering how in the world do I go on without them? When do we need courage? After a death.

When do we need courage? At a time of transition? When Moses died, he left a gaping hole not only in the heart of Joshua. Moses left a gaping hole in the hearts of all the people of God. An entire generation of Israelites had never known another leader. From the brick yards of Egypt to the doorstep of the Promised Land, Moses was the man of God. And now Moses was gone. When do we need courage? At a time of transition. When a pillar of faith, a spiritual guide, a mouthpiece of God, a shepherd, a prophet, a leader with a direct line to God, when a leader like that passes on, we need courage.

When do we need courage? When the way before us is marked with challenge, when the way before us is filled with obstacles? Joshua barely gets out of the starting blocks when he comes up to the Jordan River, raging with roaring waters that are at flood stage. How do you pass an impassable river? Once you get through that trial of faith, don't let your guard down because there is a wall that awaits you, the wall of Jericho. Life is like that. The trials and tests just keep on coming. When do we need courage? When the way before us is marked with challenge and filled with obstacles, we need courage.

God tells Joshua to be strong and courageous. If you know the story of Joshua, you know that Joshua could have answered God with one of my favorite lines, "Been there. Done that." What does Joshua mean, "Been there. Done that." Well, way back in the early days of the wilderness wanderings, the Israelites came face to face with an enemy, the Amalekites. The Amalekites attacked the Israelites. The Israelites battled back. Who led the Israelites into battle? Joshua! Joshua! Israel was not an army, they were a rag tag bunch of slaves who had been oppressed and beaten, enduring the hurtful harm of that ruler named Pharaoh. But Moses told Joshua, "Choose some of our men and go and fight the Amalekites." (Exodus 17:9) When do we need courage? When the enemy attacks and we enter the battles of life, we need courage. Joshua had been there. Joshua had done that.

And that wasn't the only time Joshua had been there. That was not the only time Joshua had done that. God sent an expedition to explore the Promised Land. Oh, the twelve who returned brought a great report back, a report about how the land was flowing with milk and honey. Here, look at the fruit we gathered. But...but there is one small problem. And it is not a small problem. It is a huge problem. There are giants in the land, great and powerful giants. Compared to those giants we were like teeny, tiny grasshoppers. We are afraid to enter the Promised Land. Ten of the spies sent to survey the Promised Land gave this bad report. Caleb, one of the twelve, Caleb said, "We should go up and possess the land." All the others said no. Caleb had only one ally. Joshua, the son of Nun. When do you need courage? When the Promised Land beckons

you, and even though you are nothing but a grasshopper you enter that land to face the giants. Joshua had been there. Joshua had done that.

If you think about the life of Joshua, you begin to realize the question about courage is sort of all consuming. When do you need courage? All the time. Every step of the way. When you are young and when you are old. When from slavery you're bustin' and in the wilderness you're trustin'...you need courage. When across the Jordan River you must go or you're facing the walls of Jericho...you need courage. And let me tell you once again, it is not just Joshua who needs courage. All the people needed courage. If you think about it, if all the people of Israel who were mustered together after Moses died heard God say, "Be strong and courageous", they might have said, "Been there. Done that."

These were the children of Abraham.

- You want to talk about courage? "Leave your home and your land and go..." When you journey into an unknown future, you need courage.
- You want to talk about courage? "Take your son, your only son. Climb up that mountain named Moriah. Sacrifice your son to me." When you take what is most precious in your life when you lay it on the altar before God, trusting the God who says put all things in my hands, at a time like that, on a mountain like Moriah, you need courage.
- You want to talk about courage? When the king who is all powerful commands two lowly midwives to help him out in his plan to eliminate and annihilate the Israelites. Those midwives feared God more than they feared Pharaoh. When you make a decision like that you need courage.
- You want to talk about courage? Put your baby boy in a basket and push him out into the reeds, believing he has more of a future floating than he does facing that same cruel Pharaoh. When you release a baby boy into the care and protection of God, you need courage.

- You want to talk about courage? Listen to Ruth tell her mother-in-law Naomi, “Where you go I will go. Where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people. Your God will be my God.” When you leave your people and your gods to follow the one true God, and it means leaving everything else behind, you need courage.
- You want to talk about courage? David had his Goliath, Elijah had his Jezebel and the prophets of Baal, there was a fiery furnace and a lion’s den. Jeremiah suffered in a well and was all alone. Ezekiel walked through the valley of dry bones.
- You want to talk about courage? Israel, the people of God knew about courage. “Be strong and courageous.” Yes Lord, we have been there. We have done that.

Why does God even need to tell Joshua to be courageous? It is so obvious that to be people of faith you need courage. Courage has been required time and time again. Why push the play button to give the courage speech when the people have already been there, when the people have already done that?

Here is the part we probably don’t like as much. For every time the people had responded with courage, there were ten times, a hundred times, countless times they had not responded with courage. Abraham told a white lie about Sarah being his sister just to cover his own hide. Sarah told her servant Hagar to enjoy a night in the tent with old Abe because she did not have the courage to trust the promise of God. Where was Jacob’s courage when he was grabbing Esau’s heel or conniving his brother’s birthright to steal? Where was the courage of Moses when he was backpedaling away from the call of God, “I can’t do this, I can’t do that, I stutter, I’m not a leader, I am not up to the challenge, please, put your call on someone else. Not me.” And where was their courage when Israel grumbled and complained and behaved like riff raff as they stubbornly stumbled out in the desert?

God tells the people to be strong and courageous because as humans we do doubt, we fear, we worry, we run, we hide, we avoid, we scatter, we flee, we become bitter, we complain, we question, and we quiver. And just when it looks like everything is going to hell in a handbasket, we hear the voice of the Lord call to us. You might have

been there before. You might have done that before. But this is now. And now, at this time, now, at this place on your journey of faith, hear me once again. “Be strong and courageous.”

I hope this does not sound like boasting, but I am here to tell you, I know about courage. I know a lot about courage. When our oldest child, who at that time was our only child, when Jacob was maybe three years old, we spent hours and hours watching old VCR tapes of favorite movies. It got to the point when Dick Van Dyke would dance with the penguins in Mary Poppins, Jacob would slip his pants down and waddle along with Bert. When Jim Craig, the man from Snowy River, would ride his stallion, there was Jacob on his rocking horse matching Jim stride for stride. And when another Bert, Bert Lahr, who portrayed the cowardly lion in The Wizard of Oz, well, when the cowardly lion would prance and dance around in the merry old land of Oz, Jacob must have been paying close attention. How else did it come to be that one morning my peaceful slumber was interrupted by an outrageous roar from the bedroom next door. I thought my little boy was fast asleep. But no, from that bedroom I heard a sound I will never forget.

IF I WERE THE KING OF THE FORESTTTTTTTT! Oh yes, I know a lot about courage. We must have watched the Wizard of Oz a hundred times and our son Jacob knew exactly which part he wanted to play in that great quest to reach the Emerald City.

There really is something quite appealing about a lion who wants to have courage, who dreams about having courage, who pretends to have courage, and in all reality, is nothing but a coward. When I said I hope it does not sound like boasting when I say I know a lot about courage, it really is not boasting. So many times in my life, what I found out about courage is that it’s a whole heck of a lot easier to be like the lion who was a coward than it is to truly have courage. But for a coward, that lion sure gives an awesome speech about courage.

Just as Dorothy and her traveling companions are about to meet the Wizard of Oz, when they have passed through the gates of the Emerald City, when their dreams are within reach, the Lion imagines himself as what a lion is supposed to be...the King of the Forest. Awed by the brazen boldness of their friend, transformed now into the King of the

Forest, Dorothy asks him,
Your Majesty, if you were king, you wouldn't be afraid of anything?
Not nobody! Not no how!
Not even a rhinoceros? Imposerous!
How about a hippopotamus?
I'd thrash him from top to bottomus!
Supposing you met an elephant? I'd wrap him up in cellophant!
What if it were a brontosaurus? I'd show him who's king of the forest!
Mesmerized by this show of bravado, Dorothy and the others all ask the lion, "How?"
Rising up to his full height the lion responds:
Courage! What makes a king out of a slave? Courage.
What makes the flag on the mast to wave? Courage.
What makes the elephant charge his tusk in the misty mist and the dusky dusk? What makes the muskrat guard his musk? Courage.
What makes the Sphinx the 7th wonder? Courage!
What makes the dawn come up like thunder? Courage.
What makes the Hottentot so hot? What puts the "ape" in apricot? What have they got they I ain't got?
At that moment it occurs to every single one of them, what they got that he ain't got.
What have they got that I ain't got? They all respond...Courage.
And he knows it. The lion knows it. He laughs with them.
What have they got that I ain't got? Courage. Ha ha ha ha ha...you can say that again.

And how many times have we come up against it, whatever "it" is that we come up against. It could be any of a hundred things. At the beginning of the book of Joshua it is "after the death of Moses." Death, disease, discouragement, despair, doubt, a wall like Jericho, a harsh ruler like Pharaoh, a fiery furnace or a lion's den...it could be any of a hundred things, but whatever it is at that particular moment, we come up against it. And how many times have we come up against it, and said with the lion, "What have they got that I ain't got." And we know the answer. We know the answer because we don't have it. What have they

got that I ain't got? Courage. Life is so hard in so many ways. And so often we just don't have the courage.

That is why God says it to Joshua. Joshua might have been there before. Joshua might have done that before. But this is now. Now Moses has died. Now the challenge is new. Now the journey is different. Now the moment is before him. Joshua, hear me, my child. "Be strong and courageous." You are going to need courage to face this new chapter in life. My guess is Joshua knew he would need courage. We all know we need courage. But where does courage come from.

When it is "after the death", or the rivers are raging, or the wall stands before us, or the flames of the fire are licking at our feet, when the Jezebels of the world are hunting us down and we are cowering in a corner of a cave, where does courage come from? When Jesus is sending us out to go and make disciples of all nations, where does the courage to do that come from? When Jesus says, "You shall be my witnesses", where do we get the courage? When Jesus says, "Take up your cross and follow me", where, where, where do we get the courage. Jesus tells us that greater love has no man than this, that he would lay down his life for his friends. What do you need to do that kind of thing, to lay down your life for your friends? Courage. Where do we get courage?

After the death of Moses, God told Joshua to be strong and courageous. But that is not all God told Joshua. In that first chapter, when God tells Joshua to be strong and courageous, God also makes a promise. "I will be with you. I will never leave you nor forsake you."

When Jesus tells his disciples to go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Jesus also says, "I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

When Jesus tells his disciples to be his witnesses in Jerusalem, in Judea, in Samaria, yes, even to the ends of the earth, Jesus tells them, "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you."

In the same speech to his disciples when Jesus tells them that the greatest love is to lay down your life for your friends, Jesus adds the most incredible and amazing words of comfort. "Peace I leave with you;

my peace I give unto you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.” (John 14:27)

Where does courage come from? It comes from the God who promises he will always be with us. It comes from the God who promises he will never leave us, and he will never, no not ever, no never forsake us. It comes from Jesus who says, “I am with you always...even to the end of the age.” It comes from Jesus who gives us the power of the Holy Spirit. It comes from Jesus, who laid down his life for us, and who promises that nothing in all creation can separate us from his love. Where does courage come from? It comes from Jesus, our Savior, our Lord, our Good Shepherd, our Comforter, our Guardian, our Guide, our Friend. Courage comes from Jesus who says, “Let not your heart be troubled, and let your heart not be afraid.”

If there is a cowardly lion of the New Testament, it might well be Peter. When Jesus told his disciples they would all betray him, Peter said, “Lord, even if everyone else falls away, I will not.” That same night his boastful courage literally petered out. “I don’t know him. I don’t know him. No! I do not know him.” Denial, denial, denial.

But that same Peter had moments of incredible courage. Peter was the first to say to Jesus, “You are the Lord, the Christ, the Son of the Living God.” And on one particularly dark and dismal day, when disciples were deserting Jesus left and right, Jesus asked the few who were still with him, “Do you want to leave me too?” Peter had his faults. Peter had his days when his courage failed. But that day Peter said, “Where else can we go? You alone have words of eternal life.” Where else can we go? It takes courage to say those words. So this morning, praying that God will do what God promises to do, praying that God will give us, his people, his beloved children, praying that God will give us courage, I offer these words on behalf of us all. They are the words of an old hymn. They are words of commitment. Indeed, they are words of courage.

I have decided to follow Jesus, I have decided to follow Jesus, I have decided to follow Jesus. No turning back. No turning back.

Though none go with me, still I will follow...no turning back. No turning back.

The world behind me, the cross before me...no turning back. No turning back.

Will you decide now to follow Jesus? Will you decide now to follow Jesus? Will you decide now to follow Jesus? No turning back. No turning back.

Friends, be strong and courageous. The Lord loves us. The Lord is with us. Be strong and courageous.