

Jan 19 *Unafraid – Living with Courage and Hope*
 “Fear of Risking”

Exodus 3:1-10, 4:13
2 Timothy 1:3-7

Often in Scripture God calls people to take risks. In fact, you cannot be a committed Christian or a Jew without being willing to take risks. Think about some of the people from our shared faith history. Abraham and Sarah are living a comfortable retirement life in Haran. He's 75 years old. Then we read in Genesis 12: “The LORD said to Abram, ‘Leave your land, your family, and your father’s household for the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation and will bless you...all the families of earth will be blessed because of you.’” Abraham could easily have said, “No, Lord, I’ve never been to Canaan. I’m quite comfortable here. Please send someone else.” But then he would have missed out on being at the center of God’s plans. Had he said “No,” we would not know of him today.

We read about Moses in today’s scripture. At the age of 80 he was tending his father-in-law’s sheep and goats in the middle of the Sinai when God speaks to him from a burning bush and says, “I’ve seen the suffering of my people back in Egypt. Come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.” Moses gave all sorts of excuses as to why he didn’t want this job. Finally he said, “O my Lord, please send someone else.” Imagine: God is speaking to Moses, and Moses tells God to find someone else. He’s terrified. God’s primary response to Moses’ fear was captured in these words from Exodus 3:12: “God said, ‘I’ll be with you.’” Moses’ greatest and most profound life experiences all come after this, the purpose for which his life had begun years earlier. But he almost missed it for fear.

Forty years later Joshua and the Israelites are camped opposite the Promised Land, aware that there are fortified cities with people who were well armed, much stronger than the Israelites. In their moment of fear we read these words: “The Lord spoke to Joshua son of Nun, Moses’ assistant, saying, ‘As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will not fail you or forsake you. Be strong and courageous; do not be frightened or dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go.’”

And from our Christian tradition, Jesus, before his ascent into heaven, tells his disciples, a rag tag band of misfits—fishermen, tax collectors, and who knows what else—most of whom had never been outside of the Holy Land: “Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey everything that I’ve commanded you. Look, I myself will be with you every day until the end of this present age.” You want us to go where? Telling them what? Fear could have stopped them but they risked.

Over and over we find this word in Scripture: when God calls us, and this is always a call to stretch ourselves and to risk, God goes with us, and if God goes with us, we don’t need to be afraid.

But even if we don’t need to be afraid, we will be afraid, which is where courage comes in. Courage pushes us through fear. But what is our courage grounded in? Is it grounded in our abilities and power? Or is it grounded in God’s abilities and power? We know the correct answer but to access that power requires that we trust in God. We call that faith. Paul tells Timothy “God didn’t give us a Spirit that is timid but one that is powerful.”

So, maybe the first step towards overcoming a fear of failure and taking risks is to recognize that you are going to fail at times. So is everyone you know. Sometimes you are going to make the wrong decision. Someone will laugh at you. You are going to fall on your face. People will say bad things about you. And yes, these failures will hurt but not nearly as much as you fear.

Moses had a safe, steady, if fairly boring, job tending sheep for his father-in-law. He’d long ago left his upbringing in Egypt’s royal palace behind. But God had other plans. God came to Moses as he did his steady, boring job with little need to trust in himself or God, and kept calling as Moses offered excuse after excuse. Moses seemed to think only a strong, important person could carry out God’s call. Think about what God wanted Moses to do. Was he really supposed to go as one man, with no army, and demand that Pharaoh let most of his slave labor force go just because God told him to? It’s ridiculous. Yet, in the end, Moses left his safe life to answer God’s call, and marched into history trusting God to guide him in leading Israel out of slavery.

Let me ask you a question: Do you ever hear God's call to risk and, like Moses, offer up excuses? Like him, do you fear that you are not strong or important enough to live as God calls you to live? Do you think it is too hard a task or too impossible of odds? If you are willing, God can help you shift your focus from your limitations to your strengths, the greatest strength being the fact that God will be with you. Are you willing to ask God to day-by-day help you grow into a person God can use to serve God wherever you are? Are you willing to admit that you might fail, yet because God is with you try anyway?

Winston Churchill once said, "Success consists of going from failure to failure without loss of enthusiasm." Michael Jordan, the NBA star who has been described by some as "the greatest basketball player of all time" made a video, originally a spot for Nike. In it he said, "I've missed more than 9000 shots in my career and 26 times I've been trusted to take the game winning shot and missed. I've failed over and over and over again in my life. And that is why I succeed."

That all sounds good if you are extra-talented like Michael Jordan, Winston Churchill or even Moses or Joshua. But what about ordinary people like you and me? You know how these other people became extraordinary? It was some combination of talent and pushing through their fear of failure and getting back up on the horse when they were knocked off. For Abraham, Moses and Joshua it was a willingness to go into an unknown future trusting in God.

Fear of failure can be a powerful asset. It can lead us to work harder to develop skills so we don't fail. But often the fear simply leads us to flee, to quit, to make excuses and seek to avoid whatever it is we're afraid we'll fail at. But God gives us a spirit of courage and doesn't want us to be timid. We might be afraid but God gives us the courage that pushes us through fear.

In closing let me share a story of one who confronted their fears and trusted in God. She had been praying for God to use her in a new way. One day the idea came into her head that she should volunteer to preach the upcoming Laity Sunday sermon. In that church a lay person gave the sermon on a Sunday in October. She dismissed it as a crazy idea. After all, she was terrified of speaking in front of people. Even in her work when she had to give a presentation, if more than a couple of people were

present, she would get tongue-tied. Also, she had never felt comfortable talking about her faith. But the idea would not go away. That fall when I asked for volunteers she did not offer to do it. But, she decided that she would join Toastmasters. The first time she had to give a brief talk, she admitted later, it was awful. But she felt so empowered. She had done it. She had faced her fears. She worked all winter writing and presenting speeches. In the Spring she let the club know about her nudge to speak at her church. They all encouraged her and promised to attend. She volunteered. That fall, with ten from her club in the very front row, she shared a beautiful message of faith and trust. She went on to become a certified Lay Speaker, filling pulpits whenever pastors were gone. She found a new focus for her life as she transitioned into retirement.

This is the spirit of power and courage that is offered to all of us. We are afraid of failure. Guess what, you will fail! But don't worry, God is with you and you will learn from those failures, you can grow stronger and more courageous and, looking back, you might be surprised what you have accomplished because you said yes, when God called you.