

Stories of Courage: Trust Sunday, 5/21/17

1 Angela Nazworth relates the following story of courage from her blog (angelanazworth.com):

A few years ago, we took a family vacation to the beach. My daughter, just five at the time, spent most of her time far away from the water. When she did move closer toward the ocean, it was always with her hand fastened in mine. She would stand a few inches from the breaking waves using her big toe to write her name in the sand. My gentle coaxing did little to ignite her dormant adventurous spark until two of her friends, along with their mother, decided to swim out to a sandbar about 20 feet away. “Where did that island come from, Mommy?” she asked. “The sea level dropped in that spot and our friends are going to investigate. It won’t be there for long . . . would you like to check it out?” “Um . . . I don’t think so . . . wait . . . you’ll go with me, right?” “Of course,” I replied. “Well, okay then. I trust you . . . so . . . yes . . . yes, I’m going to go for it,” she squealed with delight and tightened her grip. Her bravado waned when the waves thrashed against her waist. Sensing her fear, I picked her up, rested her against my hip, and reassured her with words of comfort. “I won’t make you keep going if you don’t want to go, but if you still want to explore the island, I promise to hold you tight. I’ll keep you safe and make sure your head does not go under water. What would you like to do?” Pressing her forehead against mine she smiled then panted, “I’m going to be brave. Let’s do this together.” Her feet danced before reaching the sand as we stepped onto the island. Exhilaration exuded as she gleefully jumped up and down exclaiming, “I did it!”

My daughter learned some lessons about true courage that day. While I permitted her to enjoy the glory of her accomplishment, I knew that her newly garnered courage did not come from believing in herself. In fact, if that were the case, she would have demonstrated a reckless foolishness and rushed into the water unassisted. Instead, she realized her limits and placed her little life into the arms of someone reliable. Someone whom she knew would never sacrifice her safety. By providing my daughter security as we ventured to the sand bar, I also subtly instilled in her a fundamental element of courage . . . trust. Often, trusting God means doing things that I’m hesitant to do because living in this crazy, misguided world requires courage nearly every waking minute.

2 We continue our series on Courage this morning with Courageous Trust. The bible is dense with exhortations to trust God, especially in the Psalms and the Prophets. Here are just a few of them: “Offer right sacrifices and trust in the Lord” (Psalm 4:5); “But I trust in your unfailing love; my heart rejoices in your salvation” (Psalm 13:5); “Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the Lord our God” (Psalm 20:7); and “Trust in the Lord forever, for the Lord, the Lord, is the Rock eternal” (Isaiah 26:4). But for me, those teachings really come to life in the Biblical examples of everyday heroes of the faith who demonstrate trust in God, despite their occasional lapses of faith that remind us that they’re just as human as we are.

The Bible story we started earlier this morning, the account of Elijah’s confrontation with the prophets of Baal, is one such story. King Ahab and his wicked wife Jezebel have hunted down and killed most of God’s prophets in their land in pursuit of Jezebel’s quest to make the worship of Baal, the Canaanite storm and fertility god, the official state religion. Elijah, God’s prophet to the Northern Kingdom of Israel, is sent by God to put an end to this idolatrous worship. Elijah, with a confident trust in God’s presence and power, obediently goes. To fully understand Elijah’s courageous trust, you need to know the backstory. Old Testament prophets were inherently unpopular people because their role was to decry sin and call people to repentance and social justice. Elijah himself was referred to by King Ahab as the “troubler of Israel.” Most recently, God had sent Elijah to King Ahab to announce that there would be a drought in the land as judgment on King Ahab until God, through Elijah, declared otherwise. King Ahab was understandably furious and was seeking to kill Elijah.

In the account we conclude now, Elijah is courageously standing before King Ahab and his soldiers, before the 450 hostile prophets of Baal, and before an assembled crowd of Israelites. Elijah has challenged the prophets of Baal to a showdown with his God. The location of the showdown is to be Mount Carmel, a frequent site of ritual sacrifices. Incidentally, Elijah also challenged the 400 prophets of Asherah, another popular Canaanite deity, to participate in this contest, but after the challenge they’re never mentioned again. Apparently, they knew they had no chance and dodged the challenge!

In our first reading, Elijah established the terms of the contest. The contest was to be a challenge of fire, a great irony as Baal was thought to be able to start fires by sending lightning. Both sides would prepare a sacrificial altar with wood to burn. All are agreed that “The god who answers by setting fire to the wood is the true God!” The prophets of Baal have exhausted themselves in a day-long frenzy of fruitless petitioning to Baal, with no fire to show for it. In the conclusion to this episode, it’s Elijah’s turn to petition his God. I’m continuing from the Old Testament book of 1Kings, chapter 18, picking up with verse 36.

{Read 1Kings 18:36-39, NLT}.

3 It’s easy to read this account and imagine that there was no need for any courage on Elijah’s part. After all, God told him what to do and what to say and then, right on cue, God produced the spectacular miracle that won the crowd over. But that’s not the way it was at all for God’s prophets. Moses had plenty of struggles with trusting in God’s power and plan as he led the people of Egypt and wandered in the wilderness for forty years. Before this contest on Mount Carmel, Elijah spent years hiding out in the wilderness, living off carrion that God provided via ravens. God’s timing and God’s plan can, and perhaps usually does, look considerably different than the plans we’d make for ourselves.

And lest you think that Elijah’s courageous trust was an unwavering, superhuman thing, you need to know the story that followed this one. After witnessing the miraculous sending of fire, the defeat of the prophets of Baal, and the end of the drought, Elijah receives a message from Jezebel: “May the gods deal with me, be it ever so severely, if by this time tomorrow I do not make your life like that of one of them.” (Meaning, like one of the dead prophets of Baal). What did the courageously trusting prophet of God do, full of faith after witnessing the powerful presence of God? The Bible says, “Elijah was afraid and ran for his life.”

It’s easy to be an armchair critic and deride Elijah for his lack of faith. But who of us can say that we wouldn’t have done the very same thing in the face of such a direct and powerful threat on our lives? Elijah ran for “forty days and forty nights”- that is, a very long time- until he eventually came to Mount Horeb, where God simply asked him, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” I wonder if you can think of a time in your life when your courageous trust of God ran out and you turned tail and ran. Has God ever spoken to you in a

still, small voice and asked you, “What are you doing here?”

4 The thing about trust that’s so hard is that we tend to trust the people and things we have invested in; the people and things we have a relationship with. That’s why it’s so ironic that we put “IN GOD WE TRUST” on our money. If you’re honest about it, don’t you put a great deal of trust in money, whether it happens to be your credit card or the cash in your billfold? Wouldn’t you be completely flabbergasted if you went through the MacDonald’s drive-thru and the person at the window said to you, “I’m sorry. We’re not accepting cash or credit today?” From the time we’re old enough to hold a penny in our tiny little hands, we begin to form a relationship with money that establishes our trust that when we hand someone our money we’ll receive what we want in return.

What would it take for us to learn to have at least that same level of trust in God? Essentially, it would take relationship. Relationship is what allowed Elijah to converse with God on Mount Horeb and then screw up his courageous trust to continue with God’s assignment for him. Relationship is what allows us to bear our souls to God in prayer and to learn about the trustworthy nature of God. It’s a good thing to read in Psalm 145:13, “The Lord is faithful in all his words, and gracious in all his deeds.” That’s an important starting point. But it’s another thing all together to have an established history of talking with God in prayer, and witnessing God’s answer to prayer over a lifetime.

Henry Blackaby, author of *Experiencing God*, points out that God is always at work around us, inviting us to join him in that work through a love relationship. As we learn to respond to God’s invitation through faith and action, we come to learn through experience that God is trustworthy and our relationship with God deepens. The catch is that God always requires us to act in faith, which is being “certain of what we do not see.” (Hebrews 11:1) This then requires us to wrestle with God. As Blackaby puts it, we have a “crisis of belief.” Courageous trust in God requires a relationship that’s characterized by all these things: wrestling with God’s voice and call to action, moving forward in obedience even though we can’t see the outcome ahead of time, and then learning that God is indeed trustworthy and good. Every intimate relationship requires commitment and work, but the reward is the freedom that comes with trust.

5 Dechari Cole took the concept of courageous trust to new heights in this story from

her blog (girlsliving4god.com):

"Ok just take a few steps backward to the very edge and then lean back over it." This was the voice of the army recruit who was going to give me my first repelling experience. I wanted to, but I seriously couldn't seem to let go of my death grip on that rope. "I can't!" After a few minutes, I stepped away and was surprised that I couldn't be braver.

Now fast forward a few years later and instead of a 5-story building I was climbing in an airplane well over 5,000 feet! "Ok now scoot to the edge of the plane and stick your legs out the door. I will then hook myself to you and we are going to jump." There I was, on the edge of this small plane, way up in the sky, with a guy I was choosing to trust with my life. And out we flew! God brought these experiences to memory when He started to call me to do things that required me to be brave. The difference in the two stories is that in the first I had control. I held tightly to the rope and wouldn't let it go - not even an inch. But in the second story, I had given control to the person I chose to trust with my life and I believed He would keep me safe.

Do you see where I'm going...? God will take your life to all new heights; and honestly it's both very scary and very exciting at the same time. God wants to do amazing things through us, but our need for controlling our lives and our fear keeps us frozen where God isn't able to work through us. But God is so good to work in us to bring us to that place where we trust Him.

God will take our lives to new heights. And yes, it will be both scary and exciting at the same time. But like Abraham, Moses, and Elijah, and every other person who walked this earth before us, we need to walk closely with God and learn to let go of control and trust in God gracious leadership and provision. Please pray with me.

God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, you have demonstrated your faithfulness from generation to generation. Open our eyes to see you at work around us. Give us the courage to step out with you in ministry, trusting that your presence, power, and grace will bring to completion in us the good works that you began. Amen.



Buffalo United Methodist Church

...serving people for Jesus Christ so that we all may know joy!



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