

Just Courage: 5. Seize the Gift of Courage

Daniel 3:14-18

October 6, 2019

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The 9th grade was the year I was looking forward to. Because 9th grade meant I could play football. Today, I think football starts at seven or eight years of age, but back in my day, it wasn't until the 9th grade. And after years of watching the game and being part of the cheering crowd, my moment had arrived. I got the necessary physical from the town doctor, and then I was outfitted with all the necessary equipment – pads, helmet, mouth guard. By 9th grade, I was one of the biggest kids in my grade, so the coach was glad to see me. The first week of practice all we did was run laps around the track, do calisthenics, wind sprints, and push against the blocking machine. But after that first week there came this epiphany that football meant contact – hit another player as hard as possible to knock him down or be knocked down – and I didn't really want to do that. What I wanted was the chance to put on a game jersey and run onto the field with the crowd cheering. I didn't actually want to get in a game. I had this yearning to be brave, but I also wanted to play it safe. And after that first year in which I happily sat on the bench every game, the coach suggested I might want to find another sport. I loved what football was about. I wanted to be a football player. I just didn't want to do what was necessary to be a player.

Deep within all of us is a yearning to be brave, but we have a choice. We could to live inside our comfort zone, and yet we were made for more than that.

On Thursday, I attended the Awards Luncheon at the Twin West Chamber of Commerce. Bloom was one of three finalists for Small Business of the Year. And though Bloom did not win, I think being one of three finalists in the west metro area is pretty phenomenal. The Keynote speaker at the event was Ian Leonard weatherman on Fox 9. He gave a moving talk on purpose and passion. What is your purpose and what is your passion? And he described his own journey to find the answer. At first, he thought it was his family, his wife and two daughters. But then along life's journey he encountered detours – a concussion so severe he spent 9 weeks in bed and needed therapy to learn how to walk and talk again; and then cancer twice. And he found his family stepping in to do for him what he could not do for himself. So what's his passion? He saw it in his family. It is doing for others. He asked a question which he asks of himself every day, a question that is also behind this entire series: What will you do for somebody else today? It's easy, he says, to help the people you know and help alongside the people you know. But what about people you don't know. That's not so easy. What will you do for somebody else today? It is the question he asks both of his children at the end of every day – what have you done today to help somebody else?

And then Ian Leonard concluded with these words of John Wesley, the 18th century founder of Methodism (at a chamber of commerce business luncheon): “Do all the good you can. By all the means you can. In all the ways you can. In all the places you can. At all the times you can. To all the people you can. As long as ever you can.”

There is a path of adventure that will take you outside your comfort zone. Jesus calls it: love – not love as a feeling or an emotion but love as an action. Who are you going to love? Don't play it safe and love those you know will love you in return. Love those who are difficult to love. Love those who cannot love you in return. Love, because that's your passion and mission and purpose. But you will need courage.

Our scripture this morning describes how that is possible. The book of Daniel takes us back to the 6th century BC and a time when the armies of King Neb of Babylon attacked the nation of Judah and destroyed the city of Jerusalem. The Jews who survived were taken back to Babylon where they became slaves. The book of Daniel describes the experiences of Daniel who was probably 14 or 15 years old and three of his friends. They were strangers in exile. Their ways, their values, their customs, their beliefs and faith meant nothing to the Babylonians. They had lost everything. They were chosen by King Nebuchadnezzar to serve in the palace. But that would require a three year indoctrination process where they would be forced to adopt Babylonian customs, even given new names as part of the indoctrination process. Some of you might recognize their names: Shadrack, Meshack, and Abednego. By the third chapter of the book of Daniel, sixteen years have passed. The king appoints Daniel ruler over all the wise men of Babylon and at Daniel's request his three friends, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego are put in positions of leadership.

King Nebuchadnezzar made an image of gold, sixty cubits high and six cubits wide, and set it up on the plain of Dura in the province of Babylon. It's a statue 90 feet high by 9 feet wide – roughly the size of a grain elevator – it's gold and the King orders every person in any position of leadership to gather for a dedication of the statue. They are instructed that when the music begins, they are to drop to their knees and bow down in worship to this statue. Anyone who refuses to follow these instructions will be thrown into a furnace of fire. King Nebuchadnezzar is the most powerful person in the world. He is a brutal and violent dictator who gets what he wants. So play it safe, do what the king wants, and life will be good. But that's not what they do. On the appointed day and at the appointed hour, every one gathers at the base of the statue. The music begins and everyone drops to their knees and bows to worship the statue – when suddenly a murmur moves through the crowd as they realize not everyone is on their knees. Three young men are still standing. This is suicide. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego – the three strangers in Exile. They had lost everything – their homeland, their families, their Jewish identity, their Hebrew names and now it appears their lives. And all because they will not bow down.

So, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego are brought before the King, they are given one more chance to bow down. "Let the musicians play the music and when you hear the music you know what to do – fall down and worship the statue. Because if you don't, it's the furnace **Then what god will be able to rescue you from my power?**" But Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego refuse to bow to that god. And their response is why this story is in the Bible: **King Nebuchadnezzar, we don't need to answer your question. If our God – the one we serve – is able to rescue us from the furnace of flaming fire and from your power, Your Majesty, then let him rescue us. But if he doesn't, know this for certain, Your Majesty: we will never serve your gods or worship the gold statue you've set up.** The God we serve – not the statue, not our self-interests, not Nebuchadnezzar, - no, The God we serve is able. The God we serve is real. The God we serve made everything that is. The God we serve is here and is able to deliver us from the furnace. The God we serve is able. Therefore, King Nebuchadnezzar, what you see is not the only option. The furnace and certain death is not the only option.

How could they do that? Because they were not focused on the size of the furnace or the power of Nebuchadnezzar, but they were focused on God. "King Nebuchadnezzar, we are not afraid of you." They did not want the furnace. They showed up thinking the king could not be serious, but he was. They may have prayed that Daniel's influence would have spared them. Maybe they prayed that no one would notice when they didn't bow down and if they noticed, no one would report it. Haven't you been tempted to pray: "God just get me out of this and I'll go to church

every Sunday. I will never again doubt your existence. Just answer my prayer.” Not one of those prayers were answered, and they kept getting closer and closer to the furnace. One last attempt: “But even if God does not, we will never bow down.” How does someone even say that when their lives are on the line? Were they afraid? Absolutely! How could they not be afraid. But they had something greater – called Courage. It is a gift from God. It is bravery in the face of fear.

Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego now wait to be thrown into the flames. They didn’t have to be there. One word, one single word could have spared their lives. But there is no last second reprieve. The King watches as the three men are thrown into the furnace and into the flames and in utter amazement, the king says: **“Look! I see four men, unbound, walking around inside the fire, and they aren’t hurt! And the fourth one looks like one of the gods.”** And when the first century Christians heard this story, they knew. The furnace which looked like the worst turns out to be where Jesus is.

It’s why first century Christians took abandoned children into their homes even though they already had their own children. When plagues broke out in small towns and villages everybody else fled, but the Christians stayed. They nursed people they barely knew and they lost their lives, and people asked, “Why aren’t they afraid to die? They must know something I don’t know. They are not even afraid of death.” It was that “even if” faith. They lived in such a way that pagan Roman people began to connect the dots and within a few hundred years the world turned upside down – not because of good preaching or teaching but courageous living. Men and women who said, even if he does not, our God is able and we will be faithful because the last word is never the final word and death is not the end.

It is what motivates Christians to take the road less traveled, to stand for justice, and to love unconditionally. What will you do for someone else today? Your life and mine is not our own but is a gift from God to serve as God’s instruments of justice and love. Do we do the safe thing or the right thing? The path before us is courage and the fourth person in the furnace. I know that man, and he is with me today, which is why I can seize the gift of courage.

Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of October 6, 2019

Weekly Prayer: God, who was and is and is to yet be, fill our lives this day with the power of your presence. Open our hearts that we might learn the way of justice, mercy, and humility. Remind us, through the life of Jesus and the witness of those who follow him, that we can be persons of courage. Empower us to live Christ-like lives today and every day. Amen.

Monday, October 7

Scripture: Joshua 2:1-20, 6:22-25

Joshua, Nun’s son, secretly sent two men as spies from Shittim. He said, “Go. Look over the land, especially Jericho.” They set out and entered the house of a prostitute named Rahab. They bedded down there. Someone told the king of Jericho, “Men from the Israelites have come here tonight to spy on the land.” So the king of Jericho sent word to Rahab: “Send out the men who came to you, the ones who came to your house, because they have come to spy on the entire land.”

But the woman had taken the two men and hidden them. Then she said, “Of course the men came to me. But I didn’t know where they were from. The men left when it was time to close the gate at dark, but I don’t know where the men went. Hurry! Chase after them! You might catch up with them.” But she had taken them up to the roof and hidden them under the flax stalks that

she had laid out on the roof. The men from Jericho chased after them in the direction of the Jordan up to the fords. As soon as those chasing them went out, the gate was shut behind them.

Before the spies bedded down, Rahab went up to them on the roof. She said to the men, "I know that the LORD has given you the land. Terror over you has overwhelmed us. The entire population of the land has melted down in fear because of you. We have heard how the LORD dried up the water of the Reed Sea in front of you when you left Egypt. We have also heard what you did to Sihon and Og, the two kings of the Amorites on the other side of the Jordan. You utterly wiped them out. We heard this and our hearts turned to water. Because of you, people can no longer work up their courage. This is because the LORD your God is God in heaven above and on earth below. Now, I have been loyal to you. So pledge to me by the LORD that you in turn will deal loyally with my family. Give me a sign of good faith. Spare the lives of my father, mother, brothers, and sisters, along with everything they own. Rescue us from death." The men said to her, "We swear by our own lives to secure yours. If you don't reveal our mission, we will deal loyally and faithfully with you when the LORD gives us the land."

So she lowered the spies on a rope through the window. Her house was on the outer side of the city wall, and she lived inside the wall. Then she said to them, "Go toward the highlands so that those chasing you don't run into you. Hide there for three days until those chasing you return. Then you may go on your way." The men said to her, "We won't be responsible for this pledge you made us swear unless, when we come into the land, you tie this red woven cord in the window through which you lowered us. Gather your father, your mother, your brothers, and your whole family into the house with you. Those who go outside the doors of your house into the street will have only themselves to blame for their own deaths. We won't be responsible. If anyone lays a hand on those who are with you in the house, we will take the blame for their death. But if you reveal our mission, we won't be responsible for this pledge you made us swear."

Joshua spoke to the two men who had scouted out the land. "Go to the prostitute's house. Bring out the woman from there, along with everyone related to her, exactly as you pledged to her." So the young men who had been spies went and brought Rahab out, along with her father, her mother, her brothers, and everyone related to her. They brought her whole clan out and let them stay outside Israel's camp. They burned the city and everything in it. But they put the silver and gold, along with the bronze and iron equipment, into the treasury of the LORD's house. Joshua let Rahab the prostitute live, her family, and everyone related to her. So her family still lives among Israel today, because she hid the spies whom Joshua had sent to scout out Jericho.

Observation: Freed from slavery in Egypt, the Israelites wandered in the wilderness for 40 years. When finally they reached the Jordan River, ready to cross over into Canaan, Joshua sent two spies to study the strategic city of Jericho. Rahab, a Canaanite woman, was presented with an opportunity. Would she shelter the men, even though they were "enemies" of her people? She chose to do what put her at risk. According to the gospel of Matthew (Matthew 1:5), her action led to her becoming one of Jesus' ancestors.

Application: At first Rahab explained her actions pragmatically: "I know that the LORD has given you the land. Terror over you has overwhelmed us" (Joshua 2:9). Then she added, "The LORD your God is God in heaven above and on earth below." (verse 11). When have you seen God work through a specific moment (e.g. an illness, family crisis or financial setback) to lead you or someone close to you to greater faith?

Prayer: Lord God, the Bible doesn't explain how your Spirit prepared Rahab's heart for her part in your story—but there she was. Keep my heart open to you, and to the presence of others, knowing you are at work. Amen.

Tuesday, October 8

Scripture: Jonah 1:1-3, 3:1-10, 4:1-3, 10-11

The LORD's word came to Jonah, Amittai's son: "Get up and go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it, for their evil has come to my attention." So Jonah got up—to flee to Tarshish from the LORD! He went down to Joppa and found a ship headed for Tarshish. He paid the fare and went aboard to go with them to Tarshish, away from the LORD.

The LORD's word came to Jonah a second time: "Get up and go to Nineveh, that great city, and declare against it the proclamation that I am commanding you." And Jonah got up and went to Nineveh, according to the LORD's word. (Now Nineveh was indeed an enormous city, a three days' walk across.) Jonah started into the city, walking one day, and he cried out, "Just forty days more and Nineveh will be overthrown!" And the people of Nineveh believed God. They proclaimed a fast and put on mourning clothes, from the greatest of them to the least significant. When word of it reached the king of Nineveh, he got up from his throne, stripped himself of his robe, covered himself with mourning clothes, and sat in ashes. Then he announced, "In Nineveh, by decree of the king and his officials: Neither human nor animal, cattle nor flock, will taste anything! No grazing and no drinking water! Let humans and animals alike put on mourning clothes, and let them call upon God forcefully! And let all persons stop their evil behavior and the violence that's under their control!" He thought, Who knows? God may see this and turn from his wrath, so that we might not perish. God saw what they were doing—that they had ceased their evil behavior. So God stopped planning to destroy them, and he didn't do it.

But Jonah thought this was utterly wrong, and he became angry. He prayed to the LORD, "Come on, LORD! Wasn't this precisely my point when I was back in my own land? This is why I fled to Tarshish earlier! I know that you are a merciful and compassionate God, very patient, full of faithful love, and willing not to destroy. At this point, LORD, you may as well take my life from me, because it would be better for me to die than to live."

But the LORD said, "You 'pitied' the shrub, for which you didn't work and which you didn't raise; it grew in a night and perished in a night. Yet for my part, can't I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than one hundred twenty thousand people who can't tell their right hand from their left, and also many animals?"

Observation: Jonah was given an opportunity, but he ran from it. He ran, not due to fear, but because God was sending him to preach in Nineveh, a city that Jonah hated. The story describes some pretty dramatic measures to get Jonah to carry out God's call, including three days in the belly of a "great fish" (Jonah 1:17). God's mercy worked through a very reluctant prophet to reach the people of Nineveh.

Application: Nineveh was the capital of Assyria, which before Babylon was the dominant empire in the Middle East. The Assyrians were brutal and destructive to the peoples they conquered, including the northern kingdom of Israel. Can you relate at all to the anger Jonah expressed when God forgave these brutal enemies of his people "just" because they repented? Are there people today to whom you would rather God didn't offer mercy and forgiveness? Has there been a time when offering forgiveness came with a risk?

Prayer: God of grace, thank you for sending warnings about continually turning away from your path. Thank you even more for the mercy that always welcomes us when we turn toward you. Amen.

Wednesday, October 9

Scripture: Matthew 9:9-12

As Jesus continued on from there, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at a kiosk for collecting taxes. He said to him, "Follow me," and he got up and followed him. As Jesus sat down to eat in Matthew's house, many tax collectors and sinners joined Jesus and his disciples at the table. But when the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" When Jesus heard it, he said, "Healthy people don't need a doctor, but sick people do.

Observation: The choices that Jesus made often surprised people, and seemed illogical, unpredictable, even undesirable to some – such as the day he called Matthew, who was a tax collector. The "tax collectors" in Jesus' day were Jews who got rich helping the Roman occupiers. Most Israelites hated them as traitors and cheats. Yet Jesus bravely welcomed them into his kingdom, and even invited them into his mission.

Application: Jesus saw something in Matthew that no one else could see – maybe not even Matthew. As a result, Matthew would go on to change many lives, particularly by writing the Gospel of Matthew. Have you ever been surprised by any of the things God has done in your life? Has any part of your spiritual journey seemed illogical to you or others?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, thank you for the ways in which I see that you reached out to all people regardless of the risk. Help me to have the courage to join you in doing that. Amen.

Thursday, October 10

Scripture: John 3:1-18

There was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a Jewish leader. He came to Jesus at night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God, for no one could do these miraculous signs that you do unless God is with him." Jesus answered, "I assure you, unless someone is born anew, it's not possible to see God's kingdom." Nicodemus asked, "How is it possible for an adult to be born? It's impossible to enter the mother's womb for a second time and be born, isn't it?" Jesus answered, "I assure you, unless someone is born of water and the Spirit, it's not possible to enter God's kingdom. Whatever is born of the flesh is flesh, and whatever is born of the Spirit is spirit. Don't be surprised that I said to you, 'You must be born anew.' God's Spirit blows wherever it wishes. You hear its sound, but you don't know where it comes from or where it is going. It's the same with everyone who is born of the Spirit." Nicodemus said, "How are these things possible?" "Jesus answered, "You are a teacher of Israel and you don't know these things? I assure you that we speak about what we know and testify about what we have seen, but you don't receive our testimony. If I have told you about earthly things and you don't believe, how will you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has gone up to heaven except the one who came down from heaven, the Human One. Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so must the Human One be lifted up so that everyone who believes in him will have eternal life. God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him won't perish but will have eternal life. God didn't send his Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through

him. Whoever believes in him isn't judged; whoever doesn't believe in him is already judged, because they don't believe in the name of God's only Son.

Observation: The religious group called the Pharisees (from a Hebrew word meaning "set apart") doggedly opposed Jesus' ministry. At times, Jesus expressed anger at their hard-hearted brand of "righteousness" (Mark 3:5). However, never wrote them all off as enemies or hopeless. Whenever he found a Pharisee with any willingness to listen to him, he reached out in love.

Application: We never hear about Simon the Pharisee again in Jesus' story. Was it a waste of time for Jesus to accept Simon's invitation to dine at his house? How willing are you to "go the extra mile" to share Jesus' love with someone who may or may not choose to respond to that love? What would you risk to "do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God" (Micah 6:8)?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, you didn't limit your attention to your friends, or just to the people who liked you. Give me more of your willingness to connect with people who think very differently than I do. Amen.

Friday, October 11

Scripture: Luke 17:11-19

On the way to Jerusalem, Jesus traveled along the border between Samaria and Galilee. As he entered a village, ten men with skin diseases approached him. Keeping their distance from him, they raised their voices and said, "Jesus, Master, show us mercy!" When Jesus saw them, he said, "Go, show yourselves to the priests." As they left, they were cleansed. One of them, when he saw that he had been healed, returned and praised God with a loud voice. He fell on his face at Jesus' feet and thanked him. He was a Samaritan. Jesus replied, "Weren't ten cleansed? Where are the other nine? No one returned to praise God except this foreigner?" Then Jesus said to him, "Get up and go. Your faith has healed you."

Observation: Hatred and suspicion between the Israelites and the neighboring people of Samaria had roots that reached back over 500 years, to Israel's return from exile in Babylon (see Ezra 4:1-5). In contrast, Jesus saw Samaritans as people who needed his love as much as everyone else, and he treated them accordingly.

Application: The man in this story faced a double problem: he was not only a Samaritan, but a leper. Jesus consistently refused to follow the taboos against contact with either group. Here he healed all ten lepers, and praised the Samaritan for having a greater spirit of gratitude. Have you ever reached outside your comfort zone, and found admirable qualities in a person you'd have been tempted to shun?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, give me the inner courage to recognize who the "Samaritans" and the "lepers" are in my world. Then give me the courage to love them with your love. Amen.

Saturday, October 12

Scripture: Matthew 15:21-28

From there, Jesus went to the regions of Tyre and Sidon. A Canaanite woman from those territories came out and shouted, "Show me mercy, Son of David. My daughter is suffering terribly from demon possession." But he didn't respond to her at all. His disciples came and urged him, "Send her away; she keeps shouting out after us." Jesus replied, "I've been sent only

to the lost sheep, the people of Israel.” But she knelt before him and said, “Lord, help me.” He replied, “It is not good to take the children’s bread and toss it to dogs.” She said, “Yes, Lord. But even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall off their masters’ table.” Jesus answered, “Woman, you have great faith. It will be just as you wish.” And right then her daughter was healed.

Observation: The names Tyre and Sidon mean that Jesus had gone well outside the boundaries of Israel, into modern Lebanon, when he met the Canaanite woman and healed her child. His example in episodes like that, as well as his commission to “make disciples of all nations” (Matthew 28:19), sent his followers on a mission to continue his work of tearing down all the walls by which we humans divide ourselves from one another.

Application: Jesus’ disciples wanted him to send the Canaanite woman away. Some scholars suggest that Jesus’ seemingly harsh comments to her were a parody of the disciples’ attitudes, and that he may have made the remarks with a twinkle in his eye that emboldened the woman to press her plea. When has Jesus brought healing to strained and broken relationships in your life?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, you are our peace. With your body you broke down the barriers of hatred that divide us. Give us the wisdom to see the defining moments in our lives that will bring healing to our broken world. Amen.