

Between a Lion and a Tin Man – Snapshot: Courage
September 26, 2010

Courage, it is intangible, irreplaceable, sometimes illusive, usually inspiring. It's one of those things that we often have a lot of when we don't need it but is often in short supply when we do. It's something that we always admire in other people but sometimes don't necessarily want for ourselves or at least, we don't want to be put in the situation where we would need to have it. And much like the cowardly lion, we often boast with great bravado that we could take on the world with one paw tied behind our back but it doesn't take long for that façade to crumble in the face of real adversity. In the absence of real courage, as the lion says "life is simply unbearable" and despite what this film would have you believe, a shiny medal from a phoney wizard cannot solve the problem of courage.

Last summer we were travelling down to Iowa to visit Michelle's family and we stopped in Jamestown, N.D. and took a photo up there in front of the world's largest buffalo. Now this one's not real but they actually have an actual herd of buffalo there as well and an albino buffalo which is something fairly rare. And so, in front of this field where the buffalo are grazing they have a sign that I found particularly intriguing. The sign says "Do Not Cross this Field unless you can do it in 9.9 seconds". And I thought "Well that's interesting" but what you really need to do is read the fine print at the bottom of the sign which says "Do not cross this field unless you can do it in 9.9 seconds because the bull can do it in 10". And so if you are gonna want to cross the field you've gotta be able to do it faster than the bull. And so, sometimes when we think of acts of courage we think outrunning the bull buffalo and great big grandiose things, acts of bravery and courage like that. We think of a man who runs into a building that's on fire to help drag the people who are inside, out, or a woman who darts in front of a moving vehicle to push a child out of harms way. People who battle and fight and sacrifice and endure hardship and pain sometimes to the point of death without wavering in their conviction of what must be done. And although courage occasionally appears on this grand scale and these monumental events we don't simply need courage in these grandiose and heroic feats, we need courage just to make it through an ordinary day. Courage exists in the little things just as much as it does in the big things. Every day normal life takes courage. Dealing with grief and with illness takes courage. Being in a job, a bad job and surviving that, takes courage. Dealing with the loss of a good job, takes courage. Going to school and university every day and being bombarded with all of the facts that the Prof gives you and all of the homework and the exams that you receive while working part-time to pay for your tuition, that takes courage. Coming to a country where you don't speak the language and you don't know the culture and trying to bring your family to a better life through that situation, that takes courage. Making your relationships work, takes courage. Being a parent, takes courage. Some days more than others, it takes courage. Addressing financial challenges, especially this day and age, that takes some courage to deal with. Maintaining your morals in a culture that has lost theirs, takes courage. Having enduring

ethics in your business dealings, takes courage. Facing your advancing years, takes courage. And some days, just getting out of bed, takes some courage. You see as I thought about all of the things that lie ahead for us in our series, all the characteristics we're going to look at, I realized that it's a good thing that we're dealing with courage first, because if it weren't for courage there's no way that we would be able to master any of the rest of those things. C.S. Lewis says: "Courage is not simply one of the virtues but is a form of every virtue at it's testing point".

Courage is something that the Bible has a lot to tell us about. The Bible says 84 times, it encourages us. "Do not fear or do not be afraid". And I believe that's in there so often because God knows that to make it through life in one piece, that's going to require mustering significant amounts of courage on a regular basis. Which is why I believe He created us the way He did. He created us with a built in renewable supply of fortitude. Peter writes this. He says:

"His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of Him who called us by His own glory and goodness".

Peter said "God has given us everything that we need. And I believe that means He has given us the courage we need to face this life. However, sometimes our pipeline to the source of that courage gets narrowed or cut off altogether. And so, this morning, I want to encourage you with the knowledge that God wants to clear the clog and allow courage to flow freely into your heart. Before that can happen, we need to learn a few things about courage. Lots of stories in the Bible about people who have courage and some who don't and there's a lot of things we can learn about those and we're going to look at a few this morning and I hope if nothing else, you are encouraged by seeing people of courage living that out and seeing how God responds to those people of courage. But, because this is a sermon and I need three points, we're going to look for some truths about courage as we go through those stories, as well.

The first story comes out of the Old Testament. This one features a King named Xerxes. Now Xerxes was a King of a very powerful empire and one day he decided "I need to look for a queen" and so he sent his minions throughout the empire looking for all of the girls who were young and attractive and would be good candidates for queen. And so, one person came along and they found this young pheasant girl names Esther and they thought Esther would make a good queen and so they took Esther up to the palace and her uncle, Mordecai went with her and I love the way the story reads, it says Mordecai he went and hung about the palace essentially just to keep an eye on her. I think that's excellent. And so, Esther gets taken to the palace and once she gets to the palace she has to wait there, actually for quite a long time for her chance to meet the King and see if the King is going to choose her to be the queen and part of the reason she has to wait is because they rounded up a lot of girls to audition for the part of queen and so she just has to wait her

turn. But I found this quite interesting as well. The text in Esther says that before a girl's turn came to go before the King she had to complete 12 months of beauty treatments. Prescribed for the woman for six months was myrrh and oil and six months with perfumes and cosmetics, and I know a lot of girls who spend time getting ready for the first date but this is just a little too extreme. But Esther waits for 12 months and I guess it pays off cause eventually she goes in to the King and the King sees Esther and he thinks she's beautiful and she's perfect and so King Xerxes and Esther are married. And up to this point in the story you think "well, there's not much courage needed there". I mean she did leave her home and came to the palace and that was probably a little bit scary and she met the King and that was probably intimidating, but really not huge amounts of courage required, so far.

But, there's another character in our story and he enters at this point. His name is Haman. And Haman is buddy-buddy with Xerxes and in fact, Xerxes is so buddy-buddy with Haman that he elevates Haman, honours him above all the other nobles. Haman kind of becomes his right hand man. And Haman, for some reason, can't stand Esther's uncle Mordecai. And part of the reason he can't stand him is as Haman walks around the town looking all important, all the people bow down to him, except Mordecai and that just rubs Haman the wrong way and so Haman plots "I have to do something about this but just getting rid of Mordecai isn't good enough I have to do something more than that. I'm going to get rid of Mordecai and all his people. And somehow Mordecai finds out about this plot and he goes to Esther and tells her what Haman is planning to do. And now, Esther is faced with a choice. You see, she is a Jew as well but she hasn't told anyone yet. The only person who knows is Mordecai. And so she is in this position where she has to decide what is she going to do. Mordecai wants her to go and talk to the King and you would think that would be a simple thing, except back in that day and age going in and talking to the King was not so simple, even for the Queen. You see, if you walked into the chambers of the King uninvited, the default command was "kill you". It wasn't even where the King had to say that person came in, get them and kill them. No, the default command was "kill the person who comes in, uninvited". The only way you survive is if the King steps in and stops the default order to kill the person who walked in and the King does that by raising his golden scepter. And so, Esther has this decision to make "Do I go into the King's presence uninvited?" She even tells her uncle, she says "uncle, I haven't seen the guy in a month and so I don't know if I can just walk in there uninvited". And you may think, well, she's the Queen, surely the Queen of all people could get away with barging in uninvited once in awhile, right? Well what you need to know is that we started retelling the story in Esther Chapter 2, what happens in Esther Chapter 1, becomes really important at this point.

You see, in Esther Chapter 1, King Xerxes is throwing a big, big, BIG, party and he invites all of his buddies in and they're having this big party together and it actually says, "drinks were served in gold goblets, each goblet was one of a kind, the royal wind flowed freely".

What a generous King. The guests could drink as much as they liked, King's orders, with the waiters at their elbows to refill their drinks. And so, this was a big party with an open bar and the guys were in there for 7 days just whooping it up and on the 7th day, Xerxes has this brilliant idea and it says "on the 7th day of the party of the King, high on wine, which means drunk as a skunk, he ordered that 7 eunuchs who were his personal servants, to bring Queen Vashti to him". You see, Esther wasn't the first Queen there was Queen Vashti before her. He said "bring Queen Vashti to me resplendent in her royal crown". He wanted to show off her beauty to the guests and officials. And she was extremely good looking. Now the problem comes because Queen Vashti gets the summons to the party and she declines. She doesn't show up. Which, I am not a woman, but if I were, and a room full of guys who had been drinking for 7 days invited me to come in so that they could admire my beauty, I would probably decline, as well.

And what happens next is critical to our story. Because what happens next is after Xerxes sobers up, he gets his buddies together and says "you know what, I told Vashti to come and she didn't come, what should I do about this". And all of his friends said "you have to make a statement here. You have to make an example of her because the King ordered her to do something and she didn't do it. And if people see the King giving orders and them not being followed, especially by his own wife, then that's going to cause trouble in the Kingdom". And I love this, because they literally say this, they say: "And worse, if my wife sees that the Queen doesn't obey the King, she's going to stop obeying me so you need to put a stop to this right here and right now". And so, King Xerxes follows their instructions and their advice and he strips Vashti of her title of Queen and he banishes her from her presence and some scholars even speculate that she may have been executed. And this is Queen Vashti, his wife, his beautiful bride, who he presumably loved very much and so when we talk about Esther being Queen, that's not much solace to her. That's not a trump card by any means. And so she is faced with this choice, do I go in to the King or do I not?

And if you've known the story, Esther goes in, sure enough, to the King's presence and the King raises his sceptre to her and so she is spared and the story kind of goes on for a little bit, but the bottom line of it is that Haman is stripped of his glory and killed. Mordecai is raised and honoured and Esther and the King continue on to live together. Which gives us our first truth about courage.

Courage is risky. If you are going to be courageous you are going to have to take some risk. And let me give you some examples from everyday life.

Courage is risky in marriage. It is risky in marriage or in any friendship to be open and vulnerable to someone. To let someone see you as you really are and all your weaknesses. It takes courage in a relationship to say "You know what, this isn't working out, we need to do something to fix it". Doesn't take much courage today. Let's just let

the thing devolve until it falls apart but it takes courage to say “we’re going to do what it takes to make this work”.

It takes courage in business and it’s risky to quote the price of the thing that you are selling. The actual price, not the low price that you know is probably going to rise by the time the project is completed. But to quote the actual price. And it takes courage and it’s risky to quote the finish date of the project. That’s actually the finish date not the date that’s two weeks before the actual date that you want to quote. And it’s risky because you know that the guy down the street is knocking a couple hundred bucks off of his quote, even though he knows it will cost more. And he’s knocking a couple weeks off of his completion date even though he knows it’s going to stretch longer. It takes courage to be in business and it’s risky.

It takes courage and it’s risky, when you are dating to not get physical with your partner. And it’s risky especially if you are a girl. It is risky to say “you know what, I’m not going to do that with you”. And it’s risky because you may think he’s going to say “you know what, if you’re not going to do that then I’m not going to stay with you”. And he might dump you and that’s risky. And it takes courage to go through that.

It takes courage to be a person of spirituality. It takes courage to live as a person of faith and it’s risky to live out your faith in a world that is less and less inclined to be people of faith. It takes courage to share your belief with people around you and that can be risky as well. You see, if there were no risks then it wouldn’t require courage to go through with it. And the good news of this story is that God knows that your courage can be risky. And I’ll tell you why that’s good news in a minute.

Brings us to our second truth about courage. Courage is unpopular. Now you may think “Now that doesn’t make sense, everyone likes courageous people, don’t they? People like courage. Courage is a good thing. Who would say that that was bad? Well, courage is something that people love in theory but in reality courage is always unpopular in the sense that the people or the forces against the courageous act, are always than the person trying to complete to courageous act. After all if the people or the forces against you weren’t greater in number or power then it wouldn’t really take any courage to challenge them, would it? But always, courage is facing outnumbered odds. You are the underdog when it comes to courage.

Our second story is about a man named Gideon. And not the guy who puts the Bibles in the hotels. This is a different Gideon. Out of the Old Testament, the story of Gideon, one that, again, you might be familiar with. The Israelites were being oppressed by the Midianites and the Midianites had been oppressed and Gideon finally, through some persuasion from God, said “Okay”, and he got an army together and led them out to fight the Midianites and he started out with 32,000 men in his army. And God looked at the

army and He said “That’s too big” he said “here’s what we’re going to do, I want you to tell everyone who is scared to go home”. And so, Gideon said “Okay”. And he said “alright men. Everyone who is scared can go home”. And 22,000 went home and left him with 10,000 in his army. And Gideon says “Okay Lord, we have 10,000 we’re outnumbered but we’re going to go ahead anyway”. And God says “No, that’s not quite enough yet”. And he said “I want you to take all the men down to the stream have them drink from the water and the one’s who bend over and lap from the water as a dog, you send them home. The one’s who kind of go down and scoop it to their mouth so they can keep a hand on their sword, that’s the guys you want, you keep them”. And so they did that and several people got taken out. In fact, 21,700 out of his 22,000 people got taken out which left Gideon with 300 people. Now I tried to find a number of how many people he was going against but the best description I found was that the Midianites and the Amalekites settled the valley “thick as locusts”. Their camels could no more be counted than the sands on the seashore. And so that is the force that Gideon and his 300 men are going up against. And they surround the valley and they have trumpets and they have torches and they have pots and on the count of, on Gideon’s command everyone smashes their pots and lights their torches and blows their horns and makes this great big ruckus all around the valley and the Midianites down in the valley get so scared and confused by all the noise and ruckus that they start running around and attacking each other in the middle of the night. And then they take off down the valley and run away. And Gideon is triumphant over the Midianites. Great outstanding odds, but courage is always unpopular. Courage is always the underdogs taking on the greater power.

Think of that again, in real life terms. To have courage as a parent, is always unpopular. Particularly with your kids. To have courage as a parent to discipline your kids, even though they don’t like it. Even though they will give you the puppy dog eyes. Even though they will scream and cry and kick, sometimes in the middle of Church service. To have courage to discipline your children is always unpopular.

To have moral courage, to not get drunk. To not do drugs. To not have sex before your marriage. Those things are unpopular in our world today. To have courage with your finances, to deal with the pile of bills that is greater than your bank account balance. To change your lifestyle to fix the problem instead of doing what everyone is telling you to do, which is get more credit. Or to listen to what everyone is saying is, you can’t abandon this lifestyle. You need this lifestyle. To go against that is unpopular. To have courage in your spiritual life is unpopular. We live in a City and in a Country where practicing Christians are no longer the majority. We are the minority. Which means, if you are going to be a Christian and if you are going to live that out. You are going to be unpopular. If you were in the majority it wouldn’t require courage for you to go through with it, would it? Now the good news is, that God knows that your courage can make you unpopular. Now here is the important part.

Here is the third truth. And I love this story so much so, that we're just going to read it together.

2 Kings 6:8-20. "At one time there was a king, Aram, who was at war with Israel. After consulting with his officers he said 'at such and such a place I want to set an ambush'. The holy man sent a message to the king of Israel 'Watch out when you are passing this place because Aram has set an ambush there'. So the king of Israel checked on the place which the holy man had warned him 'this kind of thing happened all of the time'. And the king of Aram was furious over all this and he called his officials together and said 'tell me, who was leaking information to the king of Israel?' 'Who is the spy in our ranks?' But one of them said "No master, dear king, it's not any of us, it's Elisha, the prophet in Israel, he tells the king of Israel everything you say, even what you whisper in your bedroom'. The king said 'Go and find where he is, I will send someone and capture him'.

The report came back 'He is in Dothan' and he dispatched horses and chariots and impressive fighting force. They came by night and surrounded the city. Early in the morning the servant of the holy man got up and went out. Surprise, horses and chariots surrounding the city. The young man exclaimed 'oh master, what shall we do?' He said 'don't worry about it, there are more on our side than on their side'. Elisha prayed 'Oh God, open his eyes and let him see'. The eyes of the young man were opened and he saw a wonder, a whole mountainside full of horses and chariots of fire surrounding Elisha. When the Aramians attacked Elisha prayed 'God strike these people blind'. And God struck them blind just as Elisha said. Elisha called out to them 'Not that way, not this city, follow me, I'll send you to the man you're looking for'. And he led into Samaria. As he led them into the city, Elisha prayed 'God open their eyes so that they can see where they are'. God opened their eyes. They looked around and they were trapped in Samaria.

The third truth about courage. And this is the important one. Courage depends so much on your perspective. Courage depends on your perspective. Elisha's servant had one perspective when he walked out in the morning and it was not a good one. And he was having trouble mustering up the courage to face what he saw and Elisha came out and said 'let me give you a new perspective on this situation'. So God opened his eyes and his eyes were opened and he saw a hillside full of horses chariots of fire and all of a sudden courage came a lot easier for the servant of Elisha.

I found this picture this week. This is what looks to be an average size man with one who is probably two feet tall. Now you know that can't be right. You know that doesn't quite make sense and you might think 'oh that was photo shot' but it's not, it's an actual picture. But what happens when the camera man takes a few steps to the side, you see from a different perspective. This is actually a normal sized woman sitting down but she's in the background. And changing perspective can make all kinds of difference to how you

perceive the world around you. Movies use this trick all the time. One of my favourite examples is out of the Lord of the Rings. This looks like a man who looks to be 7 maybe 8 feet tall on the one side, and a man who is probably 3 feet tall on the other side. Now you may think, because this is a movie they use computers and CGI and all that other stuff. No. In this particular scene, these guys are standing in one room together and this is one shot. And you wonder how is that possible because the guy on that side is 5'11" and the guy on the other side is 5'6". He's shorter but not that much shorter. So how do they do it. It's through a trick called "forced perspective". Movies use it all the time and I started to think that one of the greatest challenges to Godly courage is that our perspective has been forced to the point where things are skewed and pushed out of proportion. Some things are exaggerated to where they look to us to be much bigger than they really are. And other things are trivialized to where they look insignificant. Now that doesn't mean that your struggles aren't real. It doesn't mean that your problems aren't big. It doesn't mean that your challenges aren't significant. And it doesn't mean there won't be, potentially huge risks and opposition to you when you exert your courage. That may be, but God is real and God is bigger and God is stronger. And when you have that perspective as you face life, it changes everything.

In Matthew, we read a story about Jesus and the disciples and Jesus had left them and the disciples went ahead in the boat out into the middle of the lake and as you can see the water was rough and in the middle of the evening Jesus came out to where they were, walking on the water and it says: Matthew 10:14-27

"During the fourth watch of the night Jesus went out to them walking on the lake. The disciples saw Jesus walking on the lake and they were terrified, as well they should be. 'It's a ghost' they said and they cried out in fear".

Here you have these burly fishermen screaming like little school girls because they see this figure coming across to them on the water and they are terrified. But, with one sentence Jesus changes their perspective. Jesus said to them "Take courage, it is I, do not be afraid". And that one sentence changes their perspective so much, that the petrified Peter jumps over the gunnels and starts walking out to meet Jesus in the middle of the lake. And you've gotta say 'What could possibly change his, what could muster up that kind of courage, what could change his perception so much. And it's because Jesus shifted his perspective on the situation. This isn't a violent storm. This isn't a ghost. This is Jesus, coming out to you. And when Peter saw that he didn't have to worry about mustering up courage because he had Jesus with him.

So this morning, as we examine courage and when we talk together, my challenge for you is to take courage but, I don't issue that as a challenge for you to kind of pull up your boot straps and to kind of psyche yourself up and decide, even though the situation looks intimidating and unbearable and unbeatable, I am going to be courageous, because I'm

going to tell myself that I'm going to be courageous. Instead, let Jesus come stand beside you and say "Take courage, it is I and I'm right here with you" can change your perspective from here on out.

I want to leave you with the words out of Deuteronomy and I think these are the ones that are printed on your bookmark. Moses went out and spoke these words to all Israel and God is speaking these words to you this morning, I believe:

"Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or terrified because of them, for the Lord your God goes with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you." Moses then summoned Joshua and said to him in the presence of all Israel. "Be strong and courageous, for you must go with these people into the land that the Lord swore to their forefathers to give them, and you must divide it among them as their inheritance. The Lord himself goes before you and will be with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged." It is I."