

**Living in Courage**  
**Genesis 12:1-9; Matthew 9:9-13**  
**Woody Berry, 6.11.2023**  
**Trinity Presbyterian Church, Columbia, Missouri**

If we trace the word “courage” back, you can hear the French sound in it... *coeur*, which means heart, which comes from the Latin, *cor*, the center of your being.

To act with courage, is to act from your heart, to act from your very core.

Courage is an attribute that is deep within us, the very deepest part of us; it is the heart of our character.

Now things happen around us, to us, all the time, but the way we face those things, the way we make sense of those things, the way we transform those things when they are bad, is through our courage. Things happen, but our response to them is up to us.

September 11, 2001 happened. But we had a choice about how to respond that day.

The first response I saw was one of courage. From our hearts, we responded in deep, deep compassion to those who lost loved ones. We celebrated the courageous firemen, policemen, ordinary citizens who responded to the spot. We responded in the courage of our strength as a country, with flags flying from every doorstep, every rooftop. We affirmed at our heart who we were, what we believed, what we held most dear. It was a time when I felt so glad to be an American, so glad to be a part of people who reached out to one another with great generosity.

And while there was great courage, I also saw fear swirl about, swirling, swirling, whisps of fear, the exact opposite of courage, like a dark underside that might appear in our sleep, like a nightmare that is beneath our consciousness during the day.

Fear is an insidious entity. It preys on our weakness. It seems much too powerful in darkness. It haunts us when we're alone. It can cause us to act in ways that are not at our core, not from the heart. Fear can cause us to be insidious.

Jesus spoke often of fear, in very clear terms about the disease that fear could create. He said that the only thing that could cast out fear was love. Isn't that amazing? Love, from the heart, courage, is what casts out the fears from our lives.

And yet it seems that in the years since 2001 that it isn't courage that has grown within us, as much as it is fear that has grown, not just around us, but within us as well, swirling around us, swirling within us.

It deepened as our national politics became one-side, the right side, the wrong side, no middle ground, no longer working together, fear making us enemies to combat and overcome, rather

than friends to learn from, to work together with. COVID did the same. A fear of death swirled around us. We became more and more isolated. We separated even further from one another.

Fear pushed love out of our hearts, out of the core of our being, caused us to want to retaliate. Fear wants revenge. Fear causes us to clamp down on our country, the world, other people. Fear holds much too much sway in our nation today.

It started with 9/11. While there was great courage all around, there was still that undercurrent of fear. Perhaps it was at its worst, surprisingly, in religious communities: fearful Christians accusing those of Islamic faith of being perpetrators of evil, fearful Jews accusing Christians and Muslims of trying to rid the world of Israel, fearful Muslims, not all Muslims, but a few hate- and fear-filled ones had actually carried out the attacks on 9/11 and now felt attacked and maligned as a whole.

It was amazing to step back and look at the dynamics and see that the swirling fear was being articulated in the same exact ways by some Christians, in the same way that fear was being spoken by some Jews, in the same way by some Muslims. A section of each faith was perpetrating fear and distrust and even hatred... in the name of faith.

Each faith saw its way as the only way... saw God as being exclusively on their side, grounded themselves in a literalism of their own sacred texts, saw the destruction of the others as a positive, even a God-directed design. Even worse, each wanted to connect the state and religion and make them one, as each believed in the singular righteousness of their own positions, their own beliefs, their own morality, their own political will, their own superiority.

Fear, exclusivity, fundamentalism was the problem.

Surely we didn't miss in today's Scripture reading that we we all God's children, all from Abraham, the father of multitudes, all needing to listen and learn and live with one another.

That's why I went to a conference after 9/11 organized by this young man named Andrew, who intentionally invited people of all faiths together. It was only at the end of the conference that I learned Andrew's brother was killed in the World Trade Center on 9/11. In his grief, in his anger, in his search for understanding, he became horrified at the way in which religion was being blamed for what happened. He felt his own faith threatened. He felt his heart wavering. But he could not let go of the goodness of his brother's life, the joy and creativity and love that his brother had in life, the faith with which his brother lived, and he knew the only way to honor his brother was to do something good, joyous, creative, most of all something faithful, something from the heart, something courageous in the midst of the swirling fear.

So he organized this conference to bring people together, to explore all our religious roots, to see what together we might be able to do.

First, we worshiped together. In the time for hearing God's Word, a passage from Isaiah was read, a Sufi tale was shared, a text from Romans was read. The sermon was given by an African American pastor from New York City; a second sermon by an Islamic believer who was a member of the U.S. Council on Foreign Relations; a third by a professor at Boston College; a fourth by a rabbi from Lubbock, Texas.

I liked the rabbi's sermon the best, maybe because he was from Texas, maybe because he read words that speak most to my heart from Isaiah. The words from the Sufi Tale touched me as well, flowing like a parable told by Jesus. The Christian preacher was good too, so good that it made me cry to be touched by someone so filled with God's Spirit.

He told about walking around in New York City for days following 9/11, about the despair he felt, about the clash of faith. He kept wondering, where in the midst of the rubble, was grace....

Where is the grace....

Where is the hope...

Where is God.....

And that's when he saw a white pigeon, struggling up from the rubble. A dirty, white pigeon, struggling one foot at a time, one wing at a time, finally flying up and out. He wished it had been a dove; it would have been more biblical, more beautiful, easier to tell. But the truth was that it was a pigeon, but one that soared high and above, reminding him that God calls us out of the rubble, out of the fear, to emerge with courage.

God always calls us out from our fears into a journey of the heart.

It's what God did with Abraham and Sarah, calling them out of that comfort zone, that place where they could hide away their lives, that place that seemed as safe as a home. God called them out to do something more. And they had to believe from their hearts, from the core of their beings, that God intended something good for their lives, something new, something holy.

You know the scariest thing we ever have to do is leave home, leave the comfortable place, leave the place we can be so complacent, even if it's a place where fear keeps us cooped in. We know how much courage it takes to get up and do something positive with our lives, even when we clearly believe God is calling us to that new kind of a life.

We're just like Jonah, when God called Jonah out, and Jonah fought God all the way. He'd rather sleep inside the belly of a whale than risk living a life out on an unknown edge. Sometimes it seems we would even stay in the worst of places, rather than risk change.

The preacher from New York City said what he learned from the pigeon was that God calls us out to fly with great courage, not knowing what tomorrow may bring. God calls us to the edges of life. And that is what I find most true about Trinity Presbyterian Church. That is what is at your core, in your hearts, I see you serving at Loaves and Fishes  
...remembering and honoring veterans on Memorial Day

...giving through the Pentecost Offering to support youth  
...gathering women to support one another and joy in each other with Fiber Fellowship  
...playing together in a weekly Mah Jongg gathering  
...gathering men for breakfast (there's nothing we like better than being together and eating biscuits!)  
...working at the Wardrobe  
...filling hygiene kits for Church World Service  
...amazing work with children through the Presbyterian Children's Homes  
...partnering with Love Columbia.....

That is all work of the heart, showing your character, coming from the center of who you are. It is the work of courage.

God doesn't want us our lives to be covered under the rubble of life today.  
God doesn't want us to build walls around ourselves in a place of fear.  
God doesn't promise any kind of safety hovering in dark places where fear keeps us down.

I would rather be a pigeon.

I want to act with courage, act from my heart, act from my very core.

I want to respond with the faith of Abraham and Sarah. I want to respond with the merciful heart of Jesus. I want to be as courageous as a man who loved his brother and organized a whole conference, hoping for something more.

I want to work with those of other faiths. Not that I want to be Jewish or Islamic. I can cooperate best by being strong in my faith, by knowing the place I stand, by being proud of my tradition. I want to be a Christian, and I really like being a Presbyterian. But one who lives not hidden in the center, but out on the edge, where there's hope for all of God's other people to live as well.

I want to be proud of my country. I want to move beyond the partisanships. I want the divisions and the harsh rhetoric to end. I want to celebrate the goodness and hope that has brought us to another 4<sup>th</sup> of July. I want to have the intelligence and passion of our first founders. I want to pop firecrackers, and sing patriotic songs, and watch parades pass by, and become a light again to the world.

I believe God needs our voices, our wings, our hearts, our lives out on the edges, to show the world what it means to live in courage.

Today,

Let the fear drop away from you.

Crawl out from the rubble.

Spread your wings.

Fly.