

Where Fear and Courage Hold Hands

Sermon 28 | Greystone Baptist Church | 8.18.2019

Hebrews 11: 29 – 12:2

After a horrible flood, the waters rose so high that one man was forced to climb up onto the roof of his house. As the water grew higher and higher, a neighbor in a rowboat appeared, and told him to get in. “No,” replied the man on the roof. “I have faith in the Lord; the Lord will save me.”

The waters continued to climb, and a speedboat appeared. “Climb in!” shouted a woman in the boat. “No,” replied the man on the roof. “I have faith in the Lord; the Lord will save me.”

The waters grew more until a helicopter appeared and the pilot spoke over the loudspeaker, saying he could lower a rope to the man on the roof. “No,” replied the man from his rooftop. “I have faith in the Lord; the Lord will save me.”

Eventually the waters rose so high that the man on the roof was washed away and soon drowned. When he arrived in heaven, the man marched straight over to God. “Heavenly Father,” he said, “I had faith in you, I prayed to you to save me, and yet you did nothing. Why?”

God gave him a puzzled look, and replied “I sent you two boats and a helicopter, what more did you expect?”¹

As we remember this well-known tale of the man on the roof, it is easy to see the error in his ways. It’s easy to blame him for not taking the rowboat, the speedboat, or the helicopter. Even still, I think all of us are sometimes tempted to look for God in the extraordinary. We want a miracle not a row boat.

Part of the problem the man on the roof experienced was that he expected his faith to save him despite his inability to get off the roof and into the boat. I wonder if he saw the boats and got scared, worrying that his footing might slip as he stepped out toward the boats that came near. I wonder if he was afraid of heights and therefore already paralyzed by the fact that he was alone on a roof, unable to reach up and grab the ladder of a helicopter?

I wonder if what he thought was faith, might also be described as fear... fear that kept him firmly planted right where he was, despite the numerous life-saving opportunities that passed by offering help?

¹ <https://friendlyatheist.patheos.com/2011/03/10/the-miracle-isnt-going-to-happen-if-you-just-sit-there/>
retrieved 8.15.2019

Fear is part of being human. It is a vital and necessary response to all kinds of danger. Physical and emotional fear has contributed to the persistence of the human race for millions of years. The ability to perceive environmental threats and respond to them was and still is critical to human survival.² Responses can vary from fight to flight to freeze or somewhere in between.

While the biological responses to fear were absolutely critical for many of our ancestors, most of us do not face deadly threats on a daily basis. Most of us live our lives in relative safety. And yet we are still afraid.

Sociologists have noted that the fear permeating our society is not new, it spans at least the last 50 years or more. Many also note that since September 11, 2001, Americans have lived in a constant state of fear which both fuels and is fueled by a fear-profit economy. If you want to protect your home, buy an alarm system. If you want to keep your children safe, buy a Subaru. No matter what your fear, there is a solution that is sure to calm your fears, for just a small little price.

To be fair, there is much to be afraid of. We have economic fears as we watch the stock market fluctuate. We have political fears as another election season draws near. We have situational fears like the fear of heights or snakes or spiders. We are afraid we might get something wrong. We are afraid the relationship won't work out, afraid the treatment plan might not work, or afraid our hard work might not pay off in the end. We are afraid of so many things, that at times, these things which cause fear begin to rise up around us making us feel like we are stranded on an island (or a rooftop) with a rising tide and no way out.

And so, like the man on the rooftop we tend to stay put and wait for a miracle.

This week as I spent time with the reading from Hebrews I had the privilege of participating in a new Advisory Board for the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship which is our primary denominational partner. Twelve of us gathered around tables for two days, some of us pastors, some lawyers, some denominational leaders, all trying to discern the future direction of CBF's advocacy initiatives. From food justice to economic justice, from education equality to healthcare disparity, from racism to sexism, from criminal justice reform to payday lending, you name the issue, I guarantee you we talked about it. As our conversations dragged on we realized there was one enemy we knew we would have to confront before we could begin our work at all. Fear.

Fear that somebody might get angry. Fear that we might not be able to make a difference. Fear that the conversation alone might be off-putting. Fear that we might have to admit to our own wrong-doing. Fear that we might be found complicit in systems of oppression.

² <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/fear>

Fear that our churches might not survive this moment and at the same time fear that our souls might not survive our silence.

There were so many things to be afraid of that the room began to feel like a rooftop with water rising all around.

I returned home on Tuesday night and returned to my study of Hebrews 11: 29 – 12: 2 where I read:

By faith the people passed through the Red Sea as if it were dry land.
By faith the walls of Jericho fell after they had been encircled for seven days.
By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient...

And it dawned on me that the heroes of our faith must have been afraid too.

The book of Hebrews is thought to be an anonymous sermon written to encourage early Christians to have faith in trying and difficult times. Under Roman rule, the way of Jesus stood in direct opposition to the status quo. The members of the early church faced political consequences for their confession that Jesus Christ is Lord because it meant that the Emperor of Rome was not. And to speak those words was treason. There was much to be afraid of and as the early Christians carried forth the movement of Jesus, some began to struggle and lose faith in the promise that God truly would redeem and reconcile the world. So, the author writes these words, some of which we read today, to remind the Hebrews of those who have gone before, their struggles, their perseverance, and their faith. The stories of old remind the people – as they remind us – that faith is not easy, nor does it arrive without a certain measure of fear and courage.

Even still, scripture says, these heroes of our faith did not receive that which was promised, because the kingdom that God was building was bigger than they were and it couldn't be accomplished in just one moment of time or with one generation. The Kingdom was built little by little as people of faith decided to face their fears and to keep moving forward. The book of Hebrews provides a long list of examples of faithful people who faced terrifying situations and decided to choose faith over fear.

For the author of Hebrews and for us today, Jesus is the ultimate example. Facing the certainty of the Roman cross, he chose faith over fear, refusing to bow to the gods of the Roman Empire which worshiped militarism, materialism, and power. Jesus chose peace, and righteousness, and humility. And he modeled those things tending to the poor and outcast, the sick and the hungry, the stranger and the orphan.

The work of Jesus is still unfolding in our world and it requires that ordinary people like Rahab the prostitute and like the Israelites staring down the waters of the Red Sea summon the courage to face whatever fears threaten to keep us silent.

I've been doing some reading lately on church growth, which almost inevitably touches on generational trends. It seems that a lot of churches are struggling because in many ways the work that the church has always done feeding the hungry, healing the sick, and loving our neighbors has begun to feel divisive. There is a fear that has begun to take root, in response to this threat that has silenced pastoral leaders and has rendered many churches irrelevant as they face a world that is broken, and hungry, and hurting.

Ironically, many people who are leaving church and avoiding all kinds of organized religion are doing so with the critique that churches are growing more and more impotent because they refuse to address the critical issues of the day. Issues like those named at the conference I attended this week.

How can we say we feed the hungry if we do not ask why people are hungry in the first place?

How can we claim to heal the sick, if we are not working for solutions to ensure that medical care is available for all, regardless of economics?

How can we talk about good stewardship of God's creation while we actively deny that we have anything to do with our environmental crisis?

How can we follow Jesus to the cross when we cannot address the death sentences we inflict upon the children of the poor, the migrant, and the outcasts among us?

I believe that churches and faithful people are silent not because we don't care; but because we are afraid. Afraid that talking about problems like these will cause conflict and damage our relationships. Afraid that people might think we're being political rather than faithful. Afraid that any solution might jeopardize our financial security. Or maybe we're even afraid that the problems are so large that any of our efforts will be too little, too late.

After a while, it starts to feel like we, the church, are stranded on a rooftop with waters rising on every side. It may be tempting to respond with fight, or flight, or even freeze. We may want to argue and armor up with all of our defenses, refusing to let ourselves be transformed by the Spirit of God who is beckoning us to engage. We may see a complex conversation on the horizon and decide to pack up and leave. Surely there's another place to go where these issues won't find us. We may look for the pause button, insisting that if we can just avoid these issues altogether, maybe they will just go away.

Maybe we want a miracle so that we don't have to face our fears head on!

Meanwhile, God is sending us lifeboats that look like regular people doing the hard work of building God's kingdom day after day. Those people look like Mark and Kim Wyatt

who serve migrants and refugees from all over the world. And in addition to their work in our Raleigh neighborhoods, Mark and Kim use their position to advocate on behalf of those newcomers who do not yet have a public voice in this country.

Sometimes our lifeboats look like CBF Southwest, a sister organization to CBF North Carolina, which seeks to engage the border crisis not from a political perspective, but from a humanitarian one that recognizes that all of us are created in God's image.

Sometimes they look like Together for Hope, our partners in Helena, Arkansas, who have expanded their reach to embrace newly orphaned children of workers in Mississippi chicken factories.

Sometimes our lifeboats look like the example set by Paul Baxley, the top leader for Cooperative Baptists globally. This week, recognizing the 400th anniversary of slavery in America he wrote an incredible blog that was sent out to over 6,000 CBF Baptists calling us to open our hearts, open our minds, and go to learn everything we can about racism in America – where it came from, how it has continued to fester, and how it shows up in our politics and our churches.

These are a few lifeboats that are close enough for us to jump onto and pull ourselves out of the flood. They are not miraculous, one-size-fits-all solutions that solve the big problems of our day. But they are small steps, faithful steps, that lead us closer to those who look the most like Jesus in our world. Those who are suffering, those who are broken, those who are hungry, and those who are scared.

You see, you and I, we really don't have any reason to be afraid. We stand on the shoulders of those who have gone before, those who took the first step into the waters of the Red Sea, trusting that it would part. We are part of the tradition of a God who took down the walls of Jericho, and worked through the faithfulness of Rahab to bring the people into the promised land. We are the descendants of the earliest Christians who were persecuted, imprisoned, and some even killed for their bold statement that Jesus Christ is Lord. We are children in that family, where fear and courage hold hands to face the challenges of the moment knowing that this is just another step in the race.

So, as I think about our church, and all the lifeboats that surround us, I wonder if we might pray the words of the Iona Community printed in our worship guides and profess with our mouths that...

We believe God is present
In the darkness before dawn;
In the waiting and uncertainty
Where fear and courage join hands,
Conflict and caring link arms...
We believe in a with-us God
Who sits down in our midst

To share our humanity.

And if we truly mean what we say, will we grab hold of the hands of our sisters and brothers, will we link arms with our neighbors and lean in together... With truth, with kindness, with courage, and maybe even with a little faith that God is already working all around us... one rowboat, one speedboat, and one helicopter at a time.