

Courage

Psalm 27:1-9

Second of series: Developing Mature Character in the Psalmic School of Prayer

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Just a few years ago, St. Paul's School for Boys cancelled its lacrosse season. They had been ranked number one in the nation, but they cancelled their spring 2001 schedule. Why? A team member had seduced a girl from another private school and had videotaped the encounter. He then invited his teammates to see what they thought were game tapes, but they saw this tape instead. No one objected. No one tried to stop the tape. When the administration discovered what had happened, they engaged in an act of incredible moral courage. They cancelled the team's season, risking a considerable loss of funding from alumni who loved the sports programs of the school. They expelled the boy who made the tape; they suspended thirty others and made them enter counseling with psychologists and the school chaplain. They wanted these young men to learn that one must choose the hard right instead of the easy wrong. Reports were that this tough approach actually resulted in an increase in applications. Lacrosse may have been a big draw. Courage was a bigger draw.

Let us pray: As we have gathered in this sanctuary, finding warmth from the cold, we ask that by your Spirit, we may find in your word that which warms and enlivens our character, for our good and you glory. For the sake of your kingdom and in the name of our Savior we pray. Amen.

You all were on my mind as I was preparing this sermon. You are a congregation of people who have demonstrated courage in the face of many challenges. Some of you have displayed physical courage in battle or in strenuous pursuits. Some of you have revealed emotional and spiritual courage in the face of overwhelming illness or loss. Others of you have shown great political and moral courage in your professions.

Why do we act courageously? No one wants to be a coward. When our son entered the Citadel, we noticed that one of the buildings was named Coward Hall. Coward Hall – at a military academy! We later found out that it was, ironically, the Dining Facility – a building that took great courage to enter. We love stories where courage triumphs. I remember that part of my required reading in high school was the book by John F. Kennedy, Profiles in Courage. I loved reading the accounts of people who stood for what they thought was right.

So, what exactly is courage? It's usually defined as the ability to confront fear in the face of pain, danger, uncertainty or intimidation. It's a quality of mind that enables you to encounter danger and difficulties without losing heart.

Aristotle said that it split the difference between cowardice and apathy on the one hand and recklessness or bravado on the other. Aristotle thought, as do most ethicists, that courage could be taught. All it requires is (1) learning the difference between cowardice and courage, (2) studying the lives of moral heroes, and (3) practicing it until it becomes a habit. Got it? Now go out and be brave.

But what does the Bible tell us about courage? We get a very real dose of it in Psalm 27. The first verse is so beautiful that we have to sing it. But even in its declaration of trust in God, there is a hint that all is not well. And so the psalm begins with haunting beauty...much like the prelude this morning. Nimrod from the Enigma Variations makes you weep for sheer beauty and also for the sense that there is great sadness behind it. So, too, with Psalm 27:

The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?

The confidence hints at fear, doesn't it? Well, if you know anything about David's life, there's plenty for him to fear. Let's just go down the list.

He has been anointed the new king of Israel. He has been promised the throne. He will replace Saul because God has decided that Saul should no longer be king. But Saul is still on the throne and he knows that David is a threat. At one time, David had been his biggest ally. David had been crucial in Saul's military and political success. So much so, that David had married into the family. But right now, David is not in the palace, quietly awaiting a change of administrations.

He is on-the-run because Saul wants to kill him. He hides in caves and forages for food. He acts like a crazy person, because people will avoid the insane, thinking that God is doing something strange with them. He is being hunted by tens of thousands of Saul's soldiers and he has maybe a few loyal soldiers, but they are hardly the quality one wants in an all-volunteer army. As Suzanne Rowe has said, he has lost everything – his wife, his family, his possessions and his position. Now, all he has is God and the promise of God...and that promise doesn't look like it's going to be fulfilled anytime soon.

He continues in the psalm to describe what faces him – it is a growing threat. At first the enemy is at a distance, then he sees it approaching. It gets near and sets up camp to prepare for an attack. And finally, the enemy is in full assault mode. It is at this point that he says, "My heart shall not fear...I will be confident."

As you read this psalm, you see David looking at his circumstances and then looking toward God. As he faces these threats, he feels secure. But, if you read the second half of the psalm there is a different tone...a tone of pleading that God would not give up on him. This is so different from his trust in first half of the psalm that some have thought they are actually two separate psalms. But that isn't the case. David lives with two very acute realities – his very real danger and his faith in God.

He has a couple of choices. He could ignore the danger and just blithely trust in God. We have a few words for people like that – one that comes to mind is ‘ostrich.’ It’s the kind of attitude toward life that makes us say, “Denial is not a river in Egypt.” On the other hand, he could immerse himself in his situation and put God on the back burner for when times are better. He’ll spend time with God when there’s a breather in his schedule. But dividing his life like that is not an option for David. He wants those two realities to exist together. He wants to live with an active faith in God in the midst of the danger.

He wants only one thing and he wants it all the days of his life. He will actively seek to live in the house of the Lord, to see the beauty of the Lord and to inquire in the Lord’s temple. He knows that this is his security when enemies surround him. In fact, in verse five, he says, “He will hide me in his shelter in the day of trouble.” This refers to the military practice of the day when the king, the leader of the troops would have his tent in the center of the army, totally protected during the battle. David actually sees God as the one who will fight for him. In fact, the implication of that image is that God would lay down his life so that David could be saved. Does this have a familiar ring to it?

We understand David’s life. It may seem paranoid to talk about enemies, but they are there, aren’t they? Some of your enemies may be exactly like David’s. Personally or politically someone is coming after you and wants to eat you alive (that’s verse two, by the way). But the enemies don’t have to be as visible as that. We have fears that are caused by worry that gets so out of hand that all the energy of our life is drained by it. There are things that intimidate us – new circumstances, relationships, the requirements of our job. There are the steady pressures that just keep building up until they explode and require every defense we’ve got. There are voices that continually tempt us to abandon God...to find our security, our hope in anything but God.

Where do we get the courage to get through the onslaughts? Like David, we need to be in God’s presence...we need to see God’s face. Now, God’s face is always turned toward us. We need to decide whether we will face God...whether we will let God surround us and fight for us.

If you did your daily Bible readings this last week, on Friday you read a very familiar story in Mark, chapter 4. Jesus has been preaching from a boat. When he’s finished, he tells the disciples that he wants to go over to the other side of the Sea of Galilee. He then promptly goes to sleep...not an uncommon occurrence after a strenuous preaching schedule.

Well, you know what happens. A fierce storm kicks up. I am told that these Galilee storms are so intense that they are dangerous even if you are on the shore. The disciples wake Jesus up and accuse him of not caring that they are on the verge of sinking. Insulting Jesus – I guess that’s one way to ask Jesus to save you... Jesus calms the storm and then turns to the disciples and asks, “Why were you afraid?” Why were they afraid? There were some pretty good reasons, Lord. The sea was not just beating at the sides of the boat. It was beating inside the boat. And that’s when things got scary. If the waves had only been beating against the side of the boat, they could have trusted the boat. But now, the waves are inside.

That’s the way it is with us. You know, the writer of this gospel understood that the sea was a metaphor for all the chaos and unrestrained evil in the world. It stood for everything which threatens to undo what God has created. And there are times when we feel like that is what’s happening to us. The chaos isn’t out there...it’s in here, in our hearts, our minds, our souls. We fear that we will be lost. But there is hope. Jesus is in the boat with us. Like the disciples, we may even feel that he doesn’t care, but like the disciples, we must realize that he is our only hope. We can trust the boat, which we have made, or we can trust Jesus.

Remember that image from the psalm...that God would hide David in his shelter in the time of trouble? Recall that the implication of that image is that God would lay down his life to save David? Well, God did. For him...for the disciples...for you.

In Christ, we are eternally in the presence of God and that will shelter us from the onslaughts that are a very real part of life. Many have said that courage is not the absence of fear. In fact, John Wayne said that courage is being scared to death and saddling up anyway. Courage is not the absence of fear...it is the presence of love. Love for family, for friends, for an ideal can cause you to do brave things. But if Christ, who is God’s love made flesh, is present in your life, your life will be guarded, sheltered in the midst of all that would make your knees buckle and your heart melt.

Eleanor Roosevelt said that you need to face your fears. But Psalm 27 tells us that as soon as we do that, we then need to face our Father in heaven. That is where we get our confidence. That is where we understand that our life comes from God and is sheltered in God. That is also where we inquire of God (verse 4). It’s good to ask things of God. It is in the presence of God that we can determine if the thing for which we need courage is the right thing. Doubt about what we are doing can kill courage. What we are doing needs to be the right thing and we need to know it’s the right thing. The only place for good and wise counsel is in the presence of the Lord.

So, for the Christian, courage is a virtue that comes from a relationship with the living God. Courage is the presence of love and that love is embodied in Jesus Christ who did, in fact, lay down his life to save you from all that seeks to destroy. We can have courage because we know there is a Savior. We can have courage if we desire one thing – to be forever in God’s presence.

But there is one more aspect to courage. For the Christian, courage is not just a virtue, it is a bold witness to a trustworthy God and that witness encourages others in the face of their own danger. In the Red Badge of Courage, by Stephen Crane, a bunch of Union soldiers are standing around on the eve of battle wondering how they will do. One of them says:

Well, I’ve thought it might get too hot for Jim Conklin in some of them scrimmages, and if a whole lot of boys started and run, why I s’pose I’d start and run. And if I once started to run, I’d run like the devil and no mistake. But if everybody was a-standin’ and a-fighting, why, I’d stand and fight. Be jiminey, I would. I’ll bet on it.

In the south transept windows are examples of those who have stood – Martin Luther King, Jr., Gandhi, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Billy Graham. There are many profiles in courage in those windows. You will notice that the bottom sections show the dark forces of evil in the world. But the courage of those who proclaim the gospel in word and deed are used by God to push back the forces of darkness

– racism, hatred, the raw will to power. There they stand. And we are called by God to stand with them and we can do that, not because we know courage is better than cowardice. We can stand with them because we stand in the presence of God who will shelter us when the threats grow.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

1. From the Institute for Global Ethics, "Moral Courage: A White Paper," Kidder and Bracy, www.globalethics.org

2 Hearts Touched by Fire, Elizabeth Dole, page 103