

***Baking Bread in the Dark***  
***(And Other Acts of Courage)***  
***Joshua 1: 5b-9; 2 Corinthians 4: 7&16***

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This morning I want to tell you some stories about people I've known through the years that have lived out extraordinary courage amidst difficult circumstances. In our Scripture passage, the LORD told Joshua: "Be strong and courageous. Do not be frightened, and do not be dismayed, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go." These words spoken specifically for Joshua as he led God's people across the Jordan also apply to all of us called upon to live through difficult times. Now what strikes me about the people I want to tell you about is that this huge courage has not been expressed through dramatic, grand actions. Rather, in the ordinary activities most of us take for granted, they faced challenges and found how God gave them strength. To a person, they never thought of themselves as courageous. They felt that they simply did what they had to do, and that only because God has sustained them. Circumstances became so precarious in these lives that the most ordinary acts became great hymns of faith. When others with hearts less stout would shrink from carrying on, these went forward. And few realize the price paid just to meet the hours of the nights and days.

I feel privileged to have known these quietly courageous people, and grateful that some years ago they entrusted me with their stories. None of these thought their stories were worth telling. But I think that's part of what gives them their unique value. I am grateful they have allowed me to share them with you.

**1) Seeing Without Sight**

An elderly woman who steadfastly maintains her own apartment lived bravely for many years. She lost her husband very early in their marriage and went to work in the furniture industry. She managed to raise three girls on her own, while remaining active in her church. She told me how in all those years God had been steadfastly present for her. As she moved toward God and resolved to act faithfully, God supplied her strength to carry on. That in itself makes for a fine story of courage.

But in her later years of her life, a more daunting foe, more heart-close even than being widowed, came to challenge her. Macular degeneration in her eyes left her

with only peripheral vision, and soon even that was fading. During the days when she experienced the first dramatic decline in sight, the diagnosis hit her hard. She reeled then, but did not fall.

For years this woman baked sourdough bread as gifts for loved ones, and to sell for a little extra income. Her loaves were delicious. No spreads were needed for bread that melted on your tongue. But how could she keep cooking when she could no longer see the dials on the stove or the lines on a measuring cup? No one would blame her if the bread stopped coming. The sourdough loaves, however, were a symbol of her life, simultaneously communicating her resolve to take care of herself no matter the circumstances and her desire to give a tangible sign of love to others. So she mixed from memory. Raised bumps on her stove helped her to feel where the dials were. In effect she was *baking in the dark*. She risked burning up not only the bread but her apartment. But she refused to give up. Her courage to live, though the world grew increasingly dim to her sight, gave her the resolve to pay the extra attention needed now for timing.

The alternative would have been just to sit down, and give in to the literal darkness. That temptation was always present. Memories of things she used to love to see were painful to her. Anyone would understand if she sunk into depression. But this woman remembered the witness of her years, and she held to her spiritual experience. God was still there for her. The reciprocal relationship remained. As she moved toward God, admitting her need while still trying as hard as she could, God moved toward her, granting strength equal to the moment. She moved through the grief of diminished vision and recovered sight through imagination. Though she could not see them, the stars still shined out her window. Through the night she courageously claimed them, seeing them in her mind. She baked bread in the dark so she could continue to love.

## **2) Daring to Laugh Again**

I'm thinking also of an experience a woman had as a high school student. Events knocked her back to a raw reliance on God until she discovered a faith far stronger than she knew she had. She described it this way:

On November 3rd of my junior year in high school, I found out what it was like to take refuge under God's wings. My brother was in a car accident and the woman he hit was killed. It wasn't his fault and there wasn't anything he could have done to prevent the accident from happening...The only thing I remember of that night, besides the flashing blue lights and the wondering eyes in the cars as they passed by, was singing Amazing Grace in my head. All I could do was sing the verse,

"Through many dangers, toils and snares..." It was as if God had taken my family under his wing, and given us a feeling of peace as the storm still continued outside his arms.

She went to school the next day, though her brother stayed at home. She could have stayed, too. But she found the courage to go and be present for him. Though there had been no negligence on his part, there were still feelings of guilt, even shame, to be faced. And the young woman went to answer the questions for her family. She defended the accidental nature of the event, and stood in the gap for him. Would you think that was enough for one week for a 16 year old? She went on:

Three days later my best friend died in a car accident. He was intelligent, nice to all people, and had a close relationship with God which he shared openly. So naturally I wondered why God decided to take him, and not somebody else...I felt numb and empty inside... At that moment I didn't want God's wings to help me from the never ending storm, nor did I want my parents' soothing words of how God had a reason for everything.

The following day I sang "Amazing Grace," again, with the Advanced Chorus for a church service. The same verse as before was sung, and as I looked at my mother in the back of the church crying, my peace was found again. The love in her watered down eyes told me that everything would be OK. It was as if God had still taken me under his wing...I slowly accepted that my friend was gone, but the impact that he left on me would last forever. Because of him, my main goal in life now is to leave an impression on someone as he left on me. Because of my friend, my faith has grown stronger. God has helped me in my heart.

As we reflected together on this period of her life, the young woman recalled an evening outside when she had been talking with friends. For a moment, she lost herself in the conversation, and laughed at a story. It was, she realized, the first time she had laughed since the accidents. She was seized with guilt. How could she ever dare to laugh again with all that had happened? Yet she knew at the same time that for the sake of both her brother and her friend, she had to live again. She was brave enough to take the step into joy and discover that the integrity of her grieving was not compromised. Rather, the grief strengthened the joy. She carried on, still a blithe spirit, but grown into a woman deepened and tempered with courage.

### **3) The Dark Smoke of Loss**

One December afternoon in North Carolina, I was driving to the airport to catch a flight for a family funeral I was to perform. As I drove, I could see a column of black smoke billowing over town. I found out what it was. A family business had caught fire by a rare occurrence of static electricity amid chemicals. The owner was an elder in our church. My heart beat against my chest like a caged animal. It wanted to be there, but I had to conduct this service. I tried to call, but there was no way to reach him. I sat in the airport thinking of how the labor of his years went up in smoke. The hope of leaving something behind for family, the promise of a retirement without worry, were all just burning.

He could quite easily have folded the business that week. Several dozen employees would have to understand. It would make for a hard Christmas, but what could any reasonable person do? This man, though, made arrangements to produce his product through another factory and immediately rented office space so that operations could continue.

The move was a costly one to him personally. The courage came in that he would not let down those people who had worked for him faithfully. He held the business together by will and prayer for them. He found the fortitude to start over in his sixties when he had been just about ready to leave the burden to someone else.

The ending was not happy. No miraculous circumstances saved the business. In the end, he had to fold in the tents. And there is where his courage shone most brightly. Everyday he faced the pressure and kept on. Every hour life looked nothing like what he had planned. But he never ran away, never flinched, never quit when quitting this business and this world was the most ardent desire of his heart.

Is it sheer coincidence that these dark days coincided with a renaissance in his faith and a renewal in his marriage? Trust in Christ began to flow from his lips in cascades of praise. He learned to hold to the providence of God and the blessedness of the coming reign of Christ. Day by day, this man discovered God holding him, praying in him, sustaining him. He kept his hands in the fire until its flames died down, and found that God brought him through alive.

### **4) As Nothing to the Love God Bears**

The final courageous woman struggled for years with multiple sclerosis. These days, thankfully, the treatments for MS have given many people much more hope of continuing mobility. But this woman's case was dire. When I knew her, she was an artist and writer just entering her thirties. In this situation, it takes courage to continue to live independently when any hour a fall might send her crashing to the floor, far from help. Walking to the kitchen, making a meal and cleaning the dishes is a courageous act of defiance she intends to continue to the last possible moment. Working when your hands don't want to respond becomes a race to complete a project before the ability to do so is stolen. My heart would break and yet thrill to see her come into church, slowly, so slowly to take her place for worship.

Some days, of course, she was angry, and other days just plain blue. The great sucking draw of the illness is, as she puts it, just to lie down on the floor and give in. Courage, then, is as simple as not collapsing when everything in her wants to quit. She passed these reflections to me:

I live, because what else is there to do? Is that courage? Others may look at me, holding 67 inches of body upright, propped up by a cane, each step a separate move, with a separate thought, and call that courage. To me, it's just being alive.

I do what I must do, sometimes with resignation, sometimes with matter of fact attitude or frustration, often with tears and cries out to God. And closely following these cries comes mysteriously genuine praise: "All praise to you, Lord Christ," I say. "All praise to you, because on these steep steps, in this interminable parking lot, *you hold my hand.*"

"Each of my sorrows is unending praise," James Dickey wrote, personifying Job in his book *God's Images*.<sup>1</sup> (1) Like Job, I was made to praise God, even if it is often through sorrow that I praise. Mourning for a body that doesn't work correctly beats in every cell of mine. So does knowledge that I am made in God's image. The two don't conflict: They are both part of who I am. I will never get to the bottom of what Dickey means with his sentence, but maybe part of the whole piece is that each sorrow, acknowledged and then dumped on God's shoulders becomes praise. I must throw every sorrow on God, too: This is one of my main jobs.

Sorrow wove into her very muscles. But it is borne every hour and transformed to doxology. She continues on, all these years later, living independently and writing productively. Just as Dickey's Job, she discovers that the weight of suffering "is nothing to the love God bears" her. The normal weakness yields to gratitude for the love of God toward her. Each sorrow is unending praise.

So I stand amazed at these courageous ones whose lives weave through the fabric of Christ's bride the church. I bow my head in shame at the petty difficulties that cause me to wilt. All the while I run on my hamster wheel of busyness, heedless of what I am doing, these few are enacting courage simply to keep on, when keeping on is a mighty act of faith. They bake bread in the dark and in their slow, halting, faltering steps, they show all of us the truth in our Scripture lessons: "Be strong and courageous. Do not be frightened, and do not be dismayed, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go... We hold this treasure in jars of clay.... Though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. So we do not lose heart."<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> James Dickey and Marvin Hayes, *God's Images*, Birmingham, AL: Oxmoor House, 1977, p. 23.

<sup>2</sup> This sermon derives from an article I wrote for *Weavings: A Journal of the Christian Spiritual Life*.