

Eastminster Worship Services

Sunday, July 5, 2009

Faith Factor

“Courage”

Acts 4:1–22

Rev. Dr. Steven M. Marsh, Senior Pastor

Remember our freedom. Yesterday, our country celebrated its 233rd anniversary of independence from the British. The colonists believed in fundamental principles that they should live their lives independently from foreign rule.

Remember the crippled man. There was no cure or hope for him. The man had been crippled from birth. He was carried to the temple gate, where he was put every day to beg from those going into the temple courts.

Remember, the Roman government. It was not the role of government to provide medical benefits or social services. The crippled man’s only income came from begging.

Remember the early church. The church gathered for teaching, fellowship, the breaking of bread and prayers. The followers of Jesus held all things in common. Acts teaches us ecclesiology; the nature and purpose of the church.

Remember the teaching of Jesus. When asked about the authenticity of his own mission, Jesus responded that the blind will receive their sight, the lame will walk, lepers will be cleansed, the deaf will hear, the dead will be raised up and the poor will have the good news preached to them.¹ Either the church is able to point to signs of healing power at work in the world because of what has happened in Jesus Christ or the community is without evidence for its claims.

Remember the healing of the crippled man; the miracle. Nothing magical happened that day at the Gate called Beautiful. When Jesus commissioned the Twelve, he gave them power and authority over all demons and to cure diseases.²

So far in our study of Acts, we have looked at the faith factors of boldness, devotion, forthrightness and

¹Luke 7:22

²Luke 9:1-6

confidence. Boldness in that followers of Jesus are to be daring.³ Devotion in that followers of Jesus are to be singular, particular and loyal in their commitment to Jesus Christ.⁴ Forthrightness in that followers of Jesus are to demonstrate their outspoken enthusiasm for Jesus.⁵ Confidence in that followers of Jesus have a belief in and reliance upon Jesus Christ to accomplish his purpose for the world in and through them.⁶ This morning, we examine the faith factor of courage. By definition, courage is "is the ability to do something that frightens one."⁷ That is followers of Jesus Christ stay the course in the midst of circumstances that would beg for retreat.

The book of the Acts of the Apostles was written between the years 70-100 AD. It is a story that proclaims the mighty acts of God. The Acts of the Apostles is the story of the church as a community informed and formed by story; the story of God's redemptive work and transformation of people and society.

In Acts 4, because of the people's amazement at the healing of the crippled man, Peter seized the opportunity to tell the crowd that this miracle was not done because of his own power or piety, but through faith in the name of Jesus. The religious authorities in charge of the temple arrested Peter and John. This is the first of many times in Acts when the early Christians clashed with the Jewish rulers. In Acts 4, Luke lists no fewer than ten different individuals or groups who opposed Peter and John. There were the priests, the captain of the temple guard, the Sadducees, the rulers, elders, scribes, Annas, Caiaphas, John and Alexander.

As a follower of Jesus, when you look at the opposition, do you ever feel small intellectually? America has great centers of learning where intricate arguments are articulated that seem to refute the credibility of the Bible. They tell us God could not have created human beings; rather, we're just the result of natural selection. We feel small morally, as we deal with the daily onslaught of immorality from our culture. Just try to suggest the idea intimacy ought to be reserved for marriage and you'll be viewed as a nut case. We even feel small religiously. We live in a world in which countries with enormous populations have very few Christians; where Christian workers are refused visas; where Bibles are banned.

Followers of Jesus must demonstrate courage. What can we learn about courage from this clash between Peter, John and the religious authorities? Let me offer five principles.

First, we should expect a clash. Luke records that the Jewish leaders were "greatly disturbed" that Peter and

³*Concise Oxford Dictionary*, Tenth Edition (Oxford: University of Oxford Press, 1999), 155.

⁴*Ibid.*, 393.

⁵*Ibid.*, 558.

⁶*Ibid.*, 299.

John were preaching about the resurrection of the dead through Jesus. The Sadducees didn't believe in the resurrection; they didn't believe in life after death at all. One moment Peter and John were preaching and the next moment they were ambushed by soldiers.

When we speak boldly about the gospel, we shouldn't be surprised when we get this kind of reaction. In our culture, we won't be thrown in jail, yet, but we may be laughed at.

Second, the messengers can be confined, but not the message. The religious rulers were trying to intimidate Peter and John by interrupting their preaching and throwing them in jail. But, Luke writes that those who heard the message and believed numbered about 5,000!

When we speak boldly about the gospel, the messengers might be confined, but not the message.

Third, the Spirit gives us words to speak. Verse 8 reads, "Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them." Remember Luke 12:11-12. "When they bring you before the synagogues and the rulers and the authorities, do not become anxious about how or what you should speak in your defense, or what you should say; for the Holy Spirit will teach you in that very hour what you ought to say."

In 1956, five American missionaries in Ecuador were brutally speared to death by a tribe of Indians known as the Aucas.⁸ After several months of exchanging gifts with the natives, the five men were speared multiple times and hacked to death with machetes. In 1956, Steve Saint was five years old when his father, Nate, flew a Piper Cruiser plane with four other missionaries into the jungles of Ecuador and dared to make contact with the Waodani. Two years later, the wife and sister of two of the murdered missionaries walked into the jungle to live with the same people who had murdered their husband and brother. Today, the Aucas, now known as the Waodani (whoa-DONNY) are a changed people.

One of the men in the tribe that fateful day was Mincaye (min-KY-ye). Years later Steve found out that Mincaye actually delivered the final spear that ultimately killed his father. Today, Steve and Mincaye consider themselves family and harbor no resentment. Many are confounded by their relationship. Steve has written that their relationship doesn't make sense unless you put God in the equation. Without the death of Steve's Dad, the Waodani would not have been reached. Mincaye would not have adopted Steve. Thousands of people, who were stirred by the missionaries' deaths, would not have dedicated their lives to taking the gospel to unreached groups like the Waodani

⁷Ibid., 327.

⁸Steve Saint, *End of the Spear* (Tyndale House Publishers, 2005).

all over the world.

When we speak boldly about the gospel, it is the Spirit not our intellect or creativity. At the moment we have no idea what to say, God comes beside us to fill and empower us.

Fourth, we must not compromise the message. Peter's message is pointed and clear. Initially, he addresses the religious leaders with a measure of respect; he calls them "rulers and elders of the people" instead of "you brood of vipers." Then he employs a little irony. Are we on trial here for helping the crippled man? Is it a crime to make someone well? Then Peter got more pointed. He states that this man is able to walk by the power of Jesus Christ "whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead." Then Peter continued: and by the way, salvation is found in no one else.

When we speak boldly about the gospel, it is not popular. People aren't all that offended by our believing in Jesus. But if you want to get a reaction, then tell someone there is no other way to be saved. Tell someone that no one else did what Jesus did. No one else lived a sinless life, offered his life to take away the sin of the world and was raised from the dead and ascended into heaven. There is no other way to find salvation. People don't like that.

Finally, we must obey God rather than men in our call to be witnesses for Christ. Recall how Peter and John responded to the council's threat: "Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge; for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard." Peter assumed he had to choose between heeding God and heeding the rulers, which implies the rulers weren't speaking for God. Peter didn't express any apology for this assumption. With a disarming simplicity, he spoke. The issue, he said, was whether he and John should obey the religious leaders or God. Peter made them tell him which he should do.

When we speak boldly about the gospel, some will question us. It is true that we are called to obey the governing authorities unless they contradict God's Word. The basis for Peter's response is his utter assurance that Jesus is alive and obeying him comes before obeying any human ruler. Peter said, "We must speak what we have seen and heard." They were witnesses.

I've been thinking a lot about independence; independence as a nation and the church. Independence is fundamentally about being missional. A missional church is one where "bearing witness" is the heart of the church's ministry.

We've got to undergo conversion in order to be faithful to the great commandments of loving God, loving neighbor and going to the city, nation and ends of the earth with the good news. Help me figure this out!

The church must break free from culture's definition of and hold on it. The kingdom of God is near.

I've been pondering the meaning of independence for our country. Does our flag convey any meaning of America? Is the explicit visual message of the Stars and Stripes that America is simply a country that originally had thirteen and currently has fifty states? As a nation are we a "we?" Are we one people or several? Are we multicultural, bicultural, or unicultural?

I've been contemplating the meaning of independence for the church. Are we a "we?" Is Jesus one way among many or the way? Is abortion a sin or simply a form of contraception? Is the Bible God's Word or a helpful book of good counsel and advice?

I'm concluding that being "we" as a country and the church takes courage. Independence is about revival is it not? Being missional as a country and the church necessitates revival.

Remember the faith factor, courage. To be a follower of Jesus is to be a witness to God's powerful action in response to human rejection. You may be tempted to rest upon the smug self-assurance of salvation by election. But God is determined to have a people who are faithful to his promises. Spreading good news has no time or age limit. O God revive the United States of America. O God revive the church. O God revive those who call Eastminster their church home. O God revive me. Let us pray!

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