

“Courage Under Fire”
Exodus 1: 15-22

One dark night outside a small town, a fire started inside the local chemical plant. Before long it exploded into flames and an alarm went out to fire departments from miles around. After fighting the fire for over an hour, the chemical company president approached the fire chief and said, "All of our secret formulas are in the vault in the center of the plant. They must be saved! I will give \$50,000 to the engine company that brings them out safely!" As soon as the chief heard this, he ordered the firemen to strengthen their attack on the blaze. After two more hours of attacking the fire, the president of the company offered \$100,000 to the engine company that could bring out the company's secret files. From the distance, a long siren was heard and another fire truck came into sight. It was a local volunteer fire company composed entirely of men over 65. To everyone's amazement the little fire engine raced through the chemical plant gates and drove straight into the middle of the inferno. In the distance the other firemen watched as the old timers hopped off of their rig and began to fight the fire with an effort that they had never seen before. After an hour of intense fighting the volunteer company extinguished the fire and saved the secret formulas. Joyous the chemical company president announced that he would double the reward to \$200,000 and walked over to personally thank each of the volunteers. After thanking each of the old men individually the president asked the group what they intended to do with the money. The fire truck driver looked him right in the eye and said - "The first thing we're going to do is fix the brakes on that truck!"

Being brave is not easy! Most of us are faced with situations that test our courage: illness, difficult relationships, difficult decisions and so on. It is easy to imagine that under pressure we would do the right thing, but in real life it is hard to face danger and still do the right thing. The firefighters wouldn't have gone into the middle of the fire if they had the choice. Today's Bible story is about two women who displayed tremendous courage under fire. Their names are Shiphrah and Puah. They were the midwives that Pharaoh ordered to kill all male infants of the Hebrew people as they delivered them.

After living for about 400 years in Egypt, according to Exodus the Hebrew people were despised by the new Egyptian administration who saw them as a threat. The Egyptians had forgotten about Joseph and how he had helped their people and now it was time to get rid of these foreigners who seemed to multiply and do well in Egypt. One of the tactics to get rid of the Hebrew people was to kill their male newborns which would ensure their annihilation. But this evil plot is disrupted because the midwives "feared God." A better translation would be "were in awe of God," meaning they knew God's amazing love and power. They had this incredible reverence and love for God. Scholars tell us that midwives in Israel were barren women. In a culture where having children and a family was the ordinary way to build a life—to gain respect, to know the blessing of God—these barren, somewhat marginal women, found their place in the community as helping other women to bring forth new life. Their daily work, their daily routine, what they got up in the morning to do, was to help—to bring forth life. And then came the order for them to be agents of death. The choice was difficult because Pharaoh had incredible power. In essence these two women were endangering their lives and their families. They dared to lie to Pharaoh in order to save the lives of children that were not their own.

Their courage and actions were rewarded by God as they had their own children after this experience. Also, their courage brought tremendous blessing and hope for the people of Israel then and for generations to come because what they did ended up protecting the life of Moses, the faith leader who helped bring the Israelites out of Egypt into freedom. What if these women decided to play it safe? What if they just followed the orders of the king? What if they thought that their faith is important but only when life is comfortable?

It is hard for us to imagine such courage because most of us live mostly comfortable lives. We are rarely asked to risk our lives or our freedom for our faith in God. Yet, courage is part of our

daily walk of faith. Courage is the foundation for our actions of honesty, care, change, compassion, justice, love, and even learning. There is a “Faith in Action” insert in your bulletin inviting you to take three beads today to reflect on those times and situations when you have been brave or need to be brave. I hope that you will take three beads after worship. Maybe they will help you to remember courage in times of difficulty because God is with you. Sometimes being courageous for ourselves can be the most difficult step, especially if we have to face pain and deal with it. A few years ago I learned a prayer that I love very much and I often read/say it in times when I need courage:

The Whatever Prayer

Whatever I have to see

Whatever I have to feel

Whatever I have to remember,

Whatever I have to go through,

If it is for my healing,

And in the highest good of all beings, I agree to it.

Sometimes it takes a lot of courage to fight our own demons of fear, guilt, self-doubt, hate, and prejudice. There is a story that was aired in 2007 on “This American Life” on Chicago Public Radio about incredible courage. This is the story of an American soldier upon returning from Iraq and displaying amazing courage. The story takes place on the campus of Parkland Community College in Champaign, Illinois. It is December and the campus television station is showing a video montage of Holiday Greetings from various campus groups. You know, “Happy Holidays from your friends in Financial Aid.” And then came a greeting from one slight and bearded student with dark skin speaking Arabic followed by a tall, broad-shouldered white guy speaking English. The first student says Happy Holidays in Arabic and then the second guy says in English, “Happy Holidays from the Muslim Student Association.” This second guy speaking English sending warm greetings is Sam Slaven. Sam is not a Muslim. And it wasn’t so long ago that Sam’s heart would fill with hatred at the sight of someone he thought might be a Muslim. After high school Sam joined the Army and was sent to Baghdad in 2003 at the start of the war. He was convinced he was there to help the people of Iraq and when he first got to Baghdad, in the early days of the invasion, it seemed to him that the people of Iraq wanted that, too. He told the story of one family that even baked a cake for his unit. But things began to change gradually. Then came the night that changed things for a lot of guys in Sam’s unit. On October 9, 2004, his platoon was out on patrol and drove straight into an ambush. They were lured in by a woman and child pretending they needed help. Sam said, “We stopped to help and all of a sudden there were machine guns and rockets going off all at once. I had never seen anything like this even in a war movie . . . it was literally a wall of red . . . the bullets . . . the crossfire . . . the bodies . . . it was terrifying . . . the scariest thing I had ever seen and probably will ever see.” Several men from Sam’s unit were killed that night. After that, Sam said his heart hardened and he could never look at any Iraqis the same way. He hated anything that was even close to Islam. The more they hated us, the more we hated them and you could literally feel the hate build up within you.” After returning to the states, Sam was struggling. He retired from the Army and moved to Champaign, Illinois to be near family and started classes at Parkland Community College. Sam’s college campus wasn’t exactly a hotbed of Arab and Muslim culture but for Sam it didn’t take much – just the sight of an Arab man in a beard triggered anxiety and fear and hate. One day in the hallway of a campus building, he spotted this guy, Middle-Eastern looking, with a long beard. Sam had this instantaneous rush of anxiety. He said, “I had visions of grabbing him by the throat and throwing him against the wall.” And then Sam said, “It hit me. I thought to myself . . . what am I doing . . . what has happened to me . . . what have I become?” He sat down on a couch trembling. Sam said, “I don’t want to be this person who fears and hates. This isn’t me.” And he prayed “God, help me to change.” He looked up from the couch he

was sitting on and saw a poster on the bulletin board that said, "Learn about Islam. Join the Muslim Student Association. It meets on Thursday." Sam said it was like a sign. He forced himself against all his instincts to go the next Thursday. The founder and President was Yousseff Roudiff . . . who just so happened to be the man Sam felt compelled to attack in the hallway . . . who also happened to be an Iraqi. The first meeting Sam said, "I was trembling and sweating. I know my hands were clenched. I thought I was going to have a major anxiety attack. It was the first time I had been outnumbered by Arabs and Muslims since I had been in Iraq. I could feel the hate and suspicion and fear welling up inside." But Sam wasn't the only one in that room having a hard time that day. The Muslim students were also uncomfortable and suspicious. They asked him, "Why are you here?" Sam said, "I'm doing this for therapy." This was not easy, but Sam kept going back and asking questions and they would ask questions of him. They began to trust each other and eventually Sam and his new friend were able to talk about the hatred between their people and share honestly their fears. It was sheer force of will for Sam who desired a change in his heart to go to that first MSA meeting. He had to overcome every instinct he had to run the other way. Fortunately, he met someone like Yousseff who welcomed him and was willing to forgive anything he might have done in the past. This is a story of courage and deep transformation.

The midwives said to Pharaoh, in so many words, "I fear/love God, not you." The questions is for us, do we dare to love God with this kind of courage? Soren Kierkegaard once wrote, "To dare is to lose one's footing momentarily. To not dare is to lose oneself." May we always have the courage to walk this amazing journey of life which leads us to have courage for ourselves, others and for God. Amen.

FAITH IN ACTION

Maya Angelo once wrote "One isn't necessarily born with courage, but one is born with potential. Without courage, we cannot practice any other virtue with consistency. We can't be kind, true, merciful, generous, or honest." Courage is something that we all need for our daily living. Education, illness, relationships, death, work and all other aspects of life require that we have courage. There are many sources for courage: support of friends, deep conviction, compassion, faith, etc. The most lasting courage comes from a deep sense of connection to God's love and there is nothing in life or in death that can take that away from us.

The Children's Hospital & Research Center in Oakland, CA has used the Beads of Courage program to help encourage the children who struggle with serious illnesses. Through the program children tell their story using colorful beads as meaningful symbols of courage that commemorate milestones they have achieved along their unique treatment path. We invite you today to take three beads as reminders for you of times you have been or need to be courageous.

1. The first bead could be for being courageous for yourself. This could be for times when you are going through a difficult relationship with a loved one and you are in need of courage to find healing and wholeness in the midst of your struggle. Or this could be a time when you are facing a health concern and you need the courage to get through the

treatment and time of recovery. Or this maybe a time of facing loss in your life and you need the courage to cry and reach out for help.

2. The second bead could be for being courageous for someone else. This could be for times when someone you love is going through a difficult time or a time of transition or uncertainty and you need courage to walk with them on this journey.
3. The third bead could be for being courageous for God. This could be a deep sense of having to do something that God is inviting you to do (serving others, working for justice, being in mission or ministry) and you need the courage to respond and trust that your gifts are adequate. This could also be for a time when God calls you for a deeper connection and you need courage to let go of the old and familiar comforts to step into the mystery of a more intimate relationship with God.