

Cultivate An Authentic Faith

a sermon delivered by the Rev. Scott Dalgarno on October 30, 2022

based on 2 Timothy 1:1-7

“The glory of God is a human being fully alive.” St. Irenaeus.

The thing that often keeps us from being fully alive -- is fear. That’s all, just fear, but fear is enough to do it. Fear, in some cases, takes the keys to a person’s life, and drops them down a drain where they just disappear.

This morning’s text says: “God did not give us a spirit of timidity but one that is powerful, loving and self-controlled. “ (2 Tim. 1:7).

What I want to do with my time this morning is not to focus negatively on fear. Rather, I’d like to discuss courage. How nothing else will make you feel that alive. And -- where does it come from?

In doing that, let me quote an unlikely source, an author named Meg Cabot, who wrote the *Princess Diaries* series and a plethora of books for all ages. Here is what she once said of courage, “Courage is not the absence of fear, but rather the judgment that something is more important than fear.” That’s only half of her quote on the subject, but I want to start with that much.

I want to pose that as a possible way of wrestling fear down. Paul tells Timothy that he knows he possesses a precious legacy that has been handed down to him by two women – his grandmother Lois and his mother Eunice.

Similarly, I want to tell stories of two women as a way putting flesh on the bones of this subject. One of these women is a Biblical heroine, and the other is a woman who came to our nation’s attention briefly back in the 1960s.

First the Biblical story, the story of a woman named Esther.

She lived in Persia at the time of a king whose name was Ahasuerus. Now this king acted like most kings do -- as if only HIS will mattered. Most people went with the flow, times being good, but there was one person in his kingdom who couldn't abide that. It was his first wife, and her name was Vashti.

Now, Vashti was way ahead of her time. She didn't like being ordered around - she had her own agenda. And look, ancient Persia would become Iran where women have always shown gumption, like today. I'm watching Iran's women with great interest today. I'm worried sick about them, knowing what they are up against from men there. Anyway. Queen Vashti's behavior didn't please the king's chief minister – whose name was Haman.

Haman advised the king to banish the queen: if the king of Persia couldn't get his own queen to obey him, there would be trouble in the provinces, he said. Wives all over Persia might start doing whatever they wanted. This was unacceptable to the king's men, so the queen was banished.

But there had to be a queen, and scouts were sent into the countryside to spot “queenly” young women. The king would then choose one to be the new queen.

Haman knew his king; he knew that the king would choose on the basis of beauty alone. Haman hoped that the king would choose a woman who might be as useful to him as she was beautiful to the king.

Among the women finalists was Esther. Now, when the king saw Esther, he "loved her more than all the other women, and she found grace and favor in his sight...so that he made her queen."

Though the king did not know it, Esther was an orphan, a Jew in the care of her uncle, a wise man named Mordecai. Though you might have guessed that Mordecai would have frowned on this match, he actually approved, even though the man was not of her faith or her people.

Though God's name is never ever mentioned in the book of *Esther*, it is clear to anybody reading it that Mordecai was curious as to whether God might be at work in this marriage. Maybe God had a special role for Esther to play?

Times could not have been tougher. Haman had secretly hatched a plan to kill all the Jews in Persia. He knew that though they *seemed* loyal to the nation, they were first loyal to their God. So, Haman set a date for their mass execution; a final solution. He even had a secret underground gallows built for the purpose. Then, being an operator, Haman slithered up to the king and said the following:

"Dear king, it has come to our attention that there is a certain ethnic group in your kingdom that consider themselves above your laws. Allow me to be of service to you kill them all off."

The king being kind of a simpleton and not too interested in the day-to-day workings of his realm said, "Have at it." And, like water through limestone, the news leaked its way through the power structure, as it always does, and came to the Jews. Mordecai wasted no time, and sent word to his niece in the palace telling her what was about to unfold. He begged her to help.

Esther sent word back to him quickly saying, "Who am I to go to the king and plead for my people? Besides, the king hasn't sent for me in over a month, I'm not sure I'm even in royal favor anymore. Queens come and go around here. If I was to just show up in the throne room, the king might think I am headstrong like his last queen and do me in."

Esther hoped that would be the last of it, and that Mordecai might find another operative, but Mordecai could not forget the wonderful series of events that had put his niece so close to the seat of power at a time her people clearly needed a persuasive voice in a high place.

So Mordecai sent a second word to her reminding Esther that she was a Jew and it wasn't beyond imagining that she, too, might be sent to Auschwitz or wherever Mordecai was going to do his dirty work.

“Besides,” he said, “maybe you’ve been put in the king’s palace for just such a time as this.”

“Maybe it’s a God thing,” he was saying. Esther was terribly frightened, initially. She couldn’t sleep, but then she got a certain clarity about her life.

Yes, she was a small person, and this was a big thing, but she wondered if perhaps God liked to use the small when push comes to shove. Maybe she *was* her people’s only hope.

Esther takes some time to think about it, and then, gaining a sense of purpose out of a recognition of her very smallness she writes a note to her uncle saying, “Okay, I’ll do it. And if I perish, I perish.” That’s it.

Remember Meg Cabot’s remark, “Courage is not the absence of fear, but rather the judgment that something is more important than fear.”

Esther was clearly terrified. That’s why she begged off in the first place. But she thought it out. She reasoned that there was something more important than her fear, something more important, in fact, than her life. And that was the life of her people.

Now, here is the second part of Meg Cabot’s word on courage. “The brave may not live forever, but the cautious do not live at all.”

There are few things sadder than the person who realizes that a time had come in the past, a time that required courage from them, and they had not stepped up.

Well, we all have those haunting memories, but the important thing is that hopefully, we have learned from them, right?

We had determined that the next time, we will answer the call. Why, because when our lives are over, we don’t want to have said, “I never lived.”

Hear Paul’s words in Timothy once again: “God didn’t give us a spirit of timidity but one that is powerful, loving and self-controlled. “ (2 Tim. 1:7).

Remember the words of Marianne Williamson that were made famous by Nelson Mandela? “Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, ‘Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, and fabulous?’ Actually, who are you *not* to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world.”

Esther served the world, but so does everyone who steps up even for a small cause – who takes a stand – who speaks up when they hear someone else say something that is totally false but is passing as true because no one speaks up.

Now, hear the rest of the quote from Marianne Williamson: “There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people will not feel insecure around you. We are all meant to shine, as children do. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It is not just in some of us; it is in everyone and as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give others permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others.”

“The Glory of God ! – What is it? “The glory of God is a human being fully alive.” Fully alive; someone who has found a way to live beyond their fear.

I said I would tell a second story about a woman who lived beyond her fear. That story, for me, begins with a man. That man was Robert Coles; a Harvard trained child psychiatrist. You may never have heard of him.

I’d long revered him for his deep humanism. I saw him once in April of 1992. It was a watershed moment for me. I had never heard any other person speak to my heart as clearly as he spoke that evening. And I haven’t ever heard anything to equal it since.

It’s one of the thrills of my life that he agreed to mentor me on a sabbatical I took twelve years later in 2004. The venue I saw him in was the Arlene Schnitzer Auditorium downtown.

He was one of the *Portland Arts & Lectures* speakers that year. Dr. Coles spoke to us for a good hour and a half about his own life. He spoke of being part of the doctor's draft in 1960. He was stationed in Biloxi, Mississippi and had some business that had taken him into New Orleans one morning.

He found himself stopped by a police road-block. Hundreds of people surrounded an elementary school building -- the William Frantz Elementary School. It was being integrated that day.

A little girl named Ruby Bridges, six years old, was to be the first black student to attend that school, all by herself, because the white parents decided to keep their children home in protest .

Ruby came to school that morning wearing a white dress, white shoes, white socks, with a white bow in her hair. The crowd of people must have numbered 700 or 800. They jeered at her. They said they were going to get her. They told her that this would be her last day alive. A little 6 year old girl. That day was among the lowest days, morally speaking, our nation has ever seen.

Dr. Coles had worked for four years with a lot of troubled kids. He had dealt with children stuck in iron lungs, and children who had leukemia. He had been impressed with their capacity, at even a very young age, for moral inquiry.

He wondered how that little girl, Ruby Bridges, was going to stand up to this kind of pressure for days, weeks, months, a year, maybe. He knew the kind of symptoms that might be evidenced in such a child, and he requested permission to spend time with Ruby; see if he could help her through it.

Dr. Coles visited with Ruby and her family several afternoons a week. This went on for a couple of months. Every day the mob would assemble and taunt her and every day she showed up for school, ushered to the door by a phalanx of federal marshals. She did her homework and stood up to the ordeal very well.

Then one day Dr. Coles got word from Ruby's teacher that there had been an incident outside the school. She said that Ruby had been talking to the mob assembled there, and they had gotten very excited and the marshals had drawn their guns and forced Ruby inside the building.

That afternoon Dr. Coles went to see her and asked what had happened that morning. Ruby said nothing had happened. Dr. Coles said that the teacher had told him that Ruby had spoken to the people who were demonstrating against her and things had gotten pretty ugly.

Ruby said she hadn't been talking to those people. Coles said, the teacher had seen it. The teacher had seen her lips moving so if she wasn't talking to those people who was she talking to? Ruby said that she was talking to God.

Now, Dr. Coles told us that he had dealt with a number of people in psychiatric hospitals who talked to God, but he couldn't figure out why a little six year old girl would be doing that, especially outside a school in New Orleans in 1960.

Ruby said that she often talked to God. She said she had made a deal with the federal marshals to stop a couple of blocks away from the school and let her talk to God every morning, but this morning she had forgotten ... until she had seen the mob.

"What about the mob made you remember?" asked Dr. Coles. Ruby said, "Because I was praying for them." "Why," asked Dr. Coles?

Ruby said, "Don't you think they need praying for?"

Dr. Coles said, 'Well, maybe, but why should you be the one?'

Ruby said, "Because I'm the one who hears what they say."

Dr. Coles asked Ruby what she said when she prayed for them. She said, "I always say the same thing. I always say, 'God please forgive those people because they don't know what they're doing.'"

Dr. Coles then told us that those words sounded familiar to him. He knew that sometime in the history of the world, someone had said those words before.

Ruby told Dr. Coles about Jesus and the mob that **he** had had to face. He only faced them once, but she had to face them twice a day, five days a week for months on end, and hear their taunts. They were on a mission to wear her down, and she knew that, and she was only six years old.

She said that her mother and her grandmother had said that was a good prayer to pray, and she thought it was a good prayer to pray, too. And in the church they went to every Sunday, that was the prayer that they said every week when they prayed for the mob.

Dr. Cole said to us sitting in the Schnitzer Auditorium that evening in 1992 these words. I wrote them all down. He said ...

“You know, Ruby’s parents couldn’t read or write. Her mother left home after dinner every night and went downtown to an office building where she scrubbed floors and then came home, caught a few hours sleep, and then was up to get her family off to school and work the next morning.” Her father was a janitor. Ruby had never before seen a doctor until she had seen Dr. Coles.

“We would call them culturally disadvantaged today. But who is disadvantaged, really? Ruby’s parents, though illiterate, knew much of the Bible by heart.

They knew Jeremiah, and Amos, and Isaiah. They knew all about Jesus. They knew that he had never stayed at the Ritz Carleton Hotel, never went to Harvard University. They knew he had written no books and kept rather lousy company according to certain standards – the blind and the lame. This Ruby knew. This Ruby and her parents took to heart.”

Dr. Coles asked us, “What do children need -- food, clothing, a home, love ?

Yes, but love is not enough. Ruby's parents felt that she needed moral purpose; someone to believe in that was bigger than she was. Someone who had gone through everything she had to go through in life, and more, and whose character had come through it intact. We know that because of what he said from the cross.

Robert Coles finished talking about Jesus and Ruby by saying simply, "I don't know what we can do to be worthy of that, but I think we ought to try."

"God didn't give us a spirit of timidity but one that is powerful, loving and self-controlled." And when we remember that, and have a family or a faith community that reminds us of that, you know, it can make all the difference in the world when you live in times like Ruby did – yes, and times like these right now.

Amen