2-6/7-21 Courage to be First Rev. Amy Haines

Phil 3:10-16

Who do you know who achieved a goal many around them believed was impossible?

Being the first in the family to graduate from college. Losing 100 pounds for better health.

Staying married for 50 years. Following God’s call to the fulfillment of a vision.

What did it take for these accomplishments to be completed? What obstacles did they have to overcome? What adversity did they face? How much did their faith assist them to stay the course?

In the spring of 1954, Roger Bannister broke the four-minute mile, something sports commentators and physiologists claimed could never be done.

Roger was a British medical student and runner for the Amateur Athletic Association, and was not intimidated by those who said it could never be done, nor was he intimidated by the cold and windy spring day, or the 3,000 spectators in the stands at the track in Oxford, England.

…The race was carefully planned, and Bannister was aided by two other runners who acted as pacemakers, Chris Brasher and Chris Chataway. As they began the race, Brasher took the lead and Bannister fell in behind, with Chataway running in third place. When Brasher began to wear out, Bannister called for Chataway to take over. Then, just about 200 yards from the finish, Bannister exploded into first place with a final burst of energy. He sprinted to the finish line and collapsed into the arms of a minister friend.

A hush came over the crowd as the announcer read Bannister’s time. “Three minutes, 59 seconds ….” In an instant, absolute pandemonium broke out as the crowd realized that they had just witnessed the greatest feat in the history of the mile.

In three minutes and 59 seconds, Roger Bannister had broken an unbreakable record

and ran what came to be known as the “Miracle Mile.”

-- adapted from The Miracle Mile Homiletics 3-28-04

Sometimes the voices that say the goal is impossible are outside of us. Sometimes that voice is within us.

In 2004 I attended my first Women of Faith conference and Luci Swindoll shared a story of the competing voices in her head, voices of past guilt and future hope. Luci had carried a grudge for over 20 years, a grudge that refused to let go of the past. Luci had been wronged by a former friend who told a lie about her to others, and Luci did not confront her friend, choosing instead to move out of state and never speak to her again.

Yet as the months, then the years, went by, Luci’s resentment toward her former friend grew and festered until one day in her 60s Luci realized that she did not want to carry this anger and resentment with her to the grave. She felt it was impossible to let go of this grudge after so many years, but also knew that her resentment was keeping her from moving forward in faith.

Reluctantly, Luci contacted her former friend, and slowly began to forgive and forget the past hurt. Luci knew she had been forgiven by our Lord Jesus, and slowly, after over 20 years of building up the resentment, Luci spent over 4 years letting it go and allowing God to heal the relationship.

When have you had the courage to do what others thought was impossible? When have you had the courage to move forward, to stay the course, to accomplish a goal, to stay strong in faith?

Today we conclude our sermon series from the apostle Paul’s letter to the church in Philippi,

a letter that encourages them and us to courageously live by faith. First, we are called to courageously claim our identity as God’s beloved sons and daughters. This identity is grounded in God’s love for us before we ever take a step forward in faith. This identity then calls us to press on in faith, having the courage to be vulnerable, the courage to be gracious, the courage to be last, and the courage to be first.

No, this week does not contradict last week. We can be last and first at the same time. Last week we were called to have the courage to be last in order to think of others before our own selfish and sinful desires.

This week we still think of others before ourselves, and because we care for others, we are called to have the courage to be the first to know Christ, the first to press on in faith,the first to live as a shining example of God’s good news and transforming grace.

The apostle Paul never allowed the early church to simply believe in Jesus as insurance for eternal life. No, he constantly challenged the church to allow what they believed to influence their daily life here on earth. Because they received God’s grace, they were called to follow Jesus in the ways they loved God and loved neighbor. The influence of that love and grace

compelled them to have the courage to be the first to forgive, the first to claim Christ ahead of Caesar, the first to care for others in tangible ways.

In later generations the influence of that love and grace compelled the church to be first to build schools and hospitals and the first to speak up against injustice.

Today, we are compelled by that same influence of love and grace to have the courage to be first in our faith, to move forward, to press on, to become more like Jesus as we live and love and care for those around us.

The challenge today is, how often do we hold back, or get held back, unable to move forward?

How often do we hold back in fear of offending people of faith when we are called to love our community? How often do we give up on a new ministry idea because of the criticism of a few?

How often does the shame of our past stifle our future movement? How often does past failure paralyze our forward movement?

Craig Barnes reflects,

On the journey of life we hear two voices calling to us from different directions. Not only do the voices want our attention, they want us to move toward them.

One of these voices comes from the painful past. It calls you to turn your head around and keep focused on your failures or sins. “How could you have done that?” the past keeps asking. Or it may preoccupy you with the failures and sins of others who hurt you. Either way, the voice from the past makes it impossible to move ahead because it doesn’t let you even face the future. It doesn’t matter how carefully you analyze your shame, or how long you nurture the hurts you’ve collected, you’ll never have a better past.

The other voice calls out to you from heaven. It invites you to keep moving into the future

because you are not yet home, the place where you can settle down. You’ll know when you get there, because heaven is the place where you are no longer haunted by the voice from the past. In heaven, finally, there is no regret. In the meantime, as the apostle Paul says, we strain forward to what lies ahead---the heavenly call. That means we have to forgive, forget and turn away from our past failures because that is exactly what God has done. Only when you believe that are you free to move ahead.”

--Craig Barnes, 1-02, in Homiletics 3-04 p.41

Dr. Warren Wiersbe once declared:

Do not say, “Why were the former days better than these?” You do not move ahead by constantly looking in a rear view mirror. The past is a rudder to guide you, not an anchor to drag you. We must learn from the past but not live in the past.

--Dr. Warren W. Wiersbe, Bible.org/illustrations:past

The past may tell us, you cannot. But the future is telling us, you can.

The past may tell us, you ought not. But the future is calling us, please do.

The past may tell us, you are not worthy. But the future is reminding us, you are beloved.

When God frees, God redeems.

When God calls, God equips.

When God offers a glimpse of vision, God empowers us to fulfill that vision.

Throughout this sermon series, we have been reminded that courage is not simply one big act,

one unforgettable moment of sacrifice and service. In reality, courage is the daily act of living by faith, moving forward moment by moment, day by day.

Nancy Ortberg reminds us:

“Courage is putting one foot in front of the other when all you can see is a faint outline of the future.”

*-Seeing in the Dark: Finding God’s Light in the Most Unexpected Places*

*-*thepastorsworkshop.com:courage

How often have you not taken that next step, because the future is too uncertain? This certainly has held me back. I want to see the big picture as well as have some of the details worked out before moving forward. But that is not always the way of God. God invites us to step forward in trust, even when we cannot see the next step well. God invites us to keep moving forward in faith, even if we feel like we are the only one moving in a new direction.

Brad Lomenick says,

Many, many great things have begun with a single act of courage, throughout history and today. A person steps out and makes one courageous decision and that one domino starts many other dominoes falling. We have to step out and take that first step, and we may never know the ripple effect of that one courageous decision.

*-taken from Brad Lomenick, The Catalyst Leader:*

*8 Essentials for Becoming a Change Maker*

-thepastorsworkshop.com:courage

I think of biblical leaders and civil rights movement members that began with one person stepping out, then others willing to follow.

I am reminded of Acts 1:8 that foreshadows this ripple effect that began with the first disciples, then expanded with Paul’s help throughout the Roman Empire. Just before Jesus returned to heaven, he told his disciples: “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

Today, we continue to expand that ripple of God’s love and grace through mission not only around the world, but also in our own backyards. We expand the ripple of God’s love

when we choose to step out in faith, when we choose to press on in faith, when we choose to move forward even when we don’t know what that future will look like.

Look how our congregation has moved forward in the past year with online ministry, as a way to connect when we cannot see one another face to face. I give thanks for this opportunity to worship together, and give thanks for the ways you have invited other family members and friends not only from Springboro and Franklin but also from Michigan and Texas.

I give thanks that our special music today comes from a granddaughter of this congregation who lives in Columbus. Online worship and weekly devotions may only be the beginning of our digital ministry. How is God calling us to new ways of digital ministry, reaching out across technology with the good news of God’s love through Jesus?

Look how our district has moved forward in the past year with honest sharing and public witness and educational opportunities to live into our baptism vows to resist injustice,

confront the evils that divide us, and create a church that is opened to people of all races, ages and nations. How is God calling us to begin by simply listening to one another’s experiences,

and recognizing the systemic nature of struggle?

As a congregation with many generations, how do we live into a call to be a community valuing every generation, creating robust multi-generation relationships that share the love of Christ, lessen loneliness, and expand the family of God?

We must have the courage to press on in faith. Against all adversity. Against all fear. Against all apathy.

And when we have the courage to press on in faith, remember that we live into God’s resurrection power. A power that brings life out of death. A power than transforms suffering into victory. A power that comes from knowing and trusting and following in Jesus’ footsteps.

We’re not fully there yet, but we are on the way.

Let us continue to live by God’s ways as our ways, God’s love as our love, God’s power as our power. Let us continue to live by courageous faith.

Then we can echo Paul’s words today to the church in Philippi, and proclaim together:

“We’ve got our eyes on the goal, where God is beckoning us onward—to Jesus.

We’re off and running, and not turning back.

Let’s keep focused on that goal,

those of us who want everything God has for us. …

Now that we’re on the right track, let’s stay on it.” (adapted from MSG)

May it be so in all of our lives. Amen.