



GOOD NEWS: LOVE OVERCOMES

Love Lives Courageously When Life Looks Away

SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT

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Scripture: 1 John 4:18

Summary

Fear is a powerful force, often making people look the other way from what is really happening around them. Fear keeps people from becoming all God has for them and it keeps people from taking courageous action. But love is greater than fear. In fact, the Christmas story is full of moments when “love drives out fear.” In week two of The Good News series, examples of courage will inspire us to live more fearlessly. We’ll also learn how boldly following Jesus makes a genuine difference in the world today.

INTRODUCTION

Fear is a powerful force in the world today.

Many of our actions, like buying insurance or choosing a car with air bags, is at least gingerly rooted in fear. The truth of the matter is that we all have fears of some kind. For example:

- When we were kids, some of us were afraid of the dark or monsters under our bed. Perhaps as we got a little older, we might have been afraid being picked last for the pick-up game—or not being picked at all.
- Do you remember asking out a girl for the first time—and being afraid she might say “no?”
- Some activities cause fear in people, like riding a motorcycle or, in my mom’s case, crossing over high bridges in the car.
- Maybe there was someone in our lives that caused us fear, like an abusive parent or a bully down the street.
- Some people fear a medical diagnosis or facing life after a difficult divorce.

Fear is not only powerful, but it’s also legitimate.

God designed us to use fear. It actually serves as one natural mechanism to alert to approaching danger and prepares us to deal with it. When confronted with a perceived threat, our bodies respond in specific ways. Physical reactions to fear include sweating, increased heart rate, and higher than normal adrenaline levels. This physical response is also known as the “fight or flight” response; it’s your body’s preparation to either enter combat the fear or run away from it. So you see, fear is a valid emotion, even a helpful emotion.

The truth is that fear can be a healthy response to life's circumstances. It can also be unhealthy. Fear can lead us to hide, to run away, or to freeze in our shoes. It can prevent us from tackling growth obstacles or block us from doing good and living with boldness and courage. While fear has a place in our lives, we can't let it gain control in our lives. If we do, we will live a meager and defeated life. We'll never climb the Everest of God's calling for us. We must let our faith be bigger than our fears.

CHRISTMAS COURAGE

The Christmas story has fear and courage written all over it. Let me give you a few examples.

Joseph acted courageously (love for Mary).

Last week, we talked about Joseph's predicament. If you weren't able to be here, consider this short summary. Joseph discovers Mary is pregnant—and he knows he's not responsible for it. The news probably crushes him emotionally and he knows it will scar him socially. Rather than attempting to save his own reputation, the scriptures tell us “he has in mind to divorce her quietly.”

What does this mean? Because he was a righteous man, Joseph therefore could not in conscience marry Mary who was now thought to be unfaithful. And because such a marriage would have been a tacit admission of his own guilt, and also because he was unwilling to expose her to the disgrace of public divorce, Joseph therefore chose a quieter way, permitted by the law itself. The full rigor of the law might have led to Mary's stoning. Still, a public divorce was possible, though Joseph was apparently unwilling to expose Mary to such shame. The law also allowed for private divorce before two witnesses (Numbers 5:11-31).¹ Fear was protecting self; courage was acting quietly.

Mary acted courageously (love for God).

Can you imagine Mary's surprise when she finds out she is pregnant? Remember, Mary was only a teenager at the time. Her parents have likely arranged her marriage to Joseph. And being that she lives in a small town, everyone knew everyone's business. What do you supposed happened when she began to get a baby bump? Do you think people came up to her saying, “Hey Mary, looks like you been hitting the figs a little hard lately!” I don't think so. When people begin noticing, what is her explanation? Mary says, “It's not what you think: it's from God, the Holy Spirit.” Yea right, Mary! It also looks like you've been hitting the grape juice a little too much as well.

I'm not exactly sure how she responded to the other villagers, but Luke records her actual words upon finding out. They are too long to read them all but Mary's Song begins like this:

“My soul glorifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant (Luke 1:46-48a).

Friends, this is courage in the face of immense social pressure. This is a young woman who recognizes what is really going on and embraces it in the face of what I imagine to be a community of naysayers. For Mary, deep love for God gave her the strength to withstand the stares of society.

¹From the Expositor's Bible Commentary.

The Magi acted courageously (love for truth)

Let me give just one last example of Christmas courage. Do you remember the magi? These are some interesting characters in the story.

The “Magi” (*magoi*) are not easily identified with precision. Several centuries earlier the term was used for a priestly caste of Medes who enjoyed special power to interpret dreams. Daniel (1:20; 2:2; 4:7; 5:7) refers to *magoi* in the Babylonian Empire. In later centuries down to NT times, the term loosely covered a wide variety of men interested in dreams, astrology magic, books thought to contain mysterious references to the future, and the like. Whatever their origin, these men came to Bethlehem spurred on by astrological calculations. They had probably also built up their expectation of a kingly figure by working through assorted Jewish books. The tradition that the Magi were kings can be traced as far back as Tertullian (died c. 225). It probably developed under the influence of OT passages that say kings will come and worship Messiah (cf. Pss 68:29, 31; 72:10-11; Isa 49:7; 60:1-6). The theory that there were *three* “wise men” is probably a deduction from the *three* gifts (2:11). Matthew’s *magoi* come to Jerusalem, arriving, apparently from the east—possibly from Babylon, where a sizable Jewish settlement wielded considerable influence.

You know the story. They come looking for “one who has been born the king of the Jews” (Matthew 2:2). Herod entices them to inform him when they find this baby so that he may worship him, too. They find Jesus. They worship him. And they leave by another route so as to avoid the wrath of Herod. They exhibited courage in defying the political structure of the day. The love for truth overcame fear for a truth-bender.

LOVE OVERCOMES FEAR

This is the second Sunday in Advent. The theme for this week is love, but as you’ve already discerned, fear is a serious impediment to an amazing life. While boldness may seem like the antidote to fear, I propose that it is love. The apostle John says it this way: “There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love” (1 John 4:18).

All through the Biblical text, we see God’s people have to make a choice: fear people or love God. Moses could have feared the Egyptian King, but he chose love, love for God and love for his people. Daniel could have chosen fear and fallen in line with the dictates of the Babylonian captors, but he defied them and chose love for God. As we see in the Christmas story, Joseph chose love for Mary over concern for his reputation. Mary chose love for God over fear of the circumstance. The Magi chose love of truth over fear of the king.

When love so consumes us, we are emboldened to do the courageous and sometimes even the crazy. This is a pattern we see exhibited consistently through the scriptures – and we see this displayed in our world today.

MODERN EXAMPLES OF COURAGE

Example 1: Irena Sendler

There are endless examples of courage buried in the ruins of the Holocaust, but Irena Sendler's story stands out. When the Nazis invaded her native Poland and rounded up all the Jews into a walled-in ghetto, Sendler knew what was going to happen. She was a social worker but she also qualified as a nurse so she could sneak food and medicine into the ghetto. What she snuck out was even more phenomenal: it's estimated that Sendler helped get approximately 2,500 children out of the ghetto—sedated and placed in the bottom of toolboxes or lying in burlap sacks at the bottom of her truck—and sent them through a network of likeminded comrades to Christian orphanages, where they were given new identities. She kept their real names in a jar buried in her backyard. The Nazis eventually caught Sendler. They imprisoned her. Tortured her, breaking both of her legs. When the war ended she devoted herself to reuniting children with their families. She loved these children more than she loved her own life.

Example 2: The Greensboro Four

In the fall of 1959, four young men (Joseph McNeil, Franklin McCain, Ezell Blair, Jr. and David Richmond) enrolled as freshmen at North Carolina A&T University. The four young men quickly became a close-knit group and met every evening in their dorm rooms for “bull sessions”. It was during these nightly discussions that they considered challenging the institution of segregation.

The breaking point for the group came after Christmas vacation when Joseph McNeil was returning to North Carolina A&T after spending the holidays at home in New York. McNeil was denied service at a Greyhound bus station in Greensboro. The group shared McNeil's frustrating experience, and they were willing to make the necessary sacrifices - even if it meant their own lives - to provoke change in society.

On Monday, February 1, 1960 Joseph McNeil, Franklin McCain, Ezell Blair, Jr. and David Richmond (The Greensboro Four) entered the F.W. Woolworth store in Greensboro, N.C., around 4:30 p.m. and purchased merchandise at several counters. They sat down at the store's “whites only” lunch counter and ordered coffee, and were denied service, ignored, and then asked to leave. They remained seated at the counter until the store closed early at 5 p.m. The four friends immediately returned to campus and recruited others for the cause. They came back the next day, and the next. Word spread. The media showed up. The pressures intensified. People were arrested. But they kept coming back.

Over five months later, Woolworth employees Charles Bess, Mattie Long, Susie Morrison and Jamie Robinson were the first African-Americans to eat at the lunch counter. The headline of The Greensboro Record read “Lunch Counters Integrated Here”. The Kress counter opened to all on the same day.

On Tuesday, July 26, 1960, F.W. Woolworth's was officially desegregated. By August 1961, more than 70,000 people had participated in sit-ins, which resulted in more than 3,000 arrests. But the nonviolent protests of love for a people and a way of life, like these sit-ins at “whites only” lunch counters inspired subsequent kneel-ins at segregated churches, sleep-ins at segregated motel lobbies, swim-ins at segregated pools, wade-ins at segregated beaches, read-ins at segregated libraries, play-ins at segregated parks and watch-ins at segregated movies. America would never be the same.²

² <https://www.sitinemovement.org/history/greensboro-chronology.asp>

Example 3: Abby Johnson

All Abby Johnson ever wanted to do was help women. As one of the youngest Planned Parenthood clinic directors in the nation, she was involved in upwards of 22,000 abortions and counseled countless women about their reproductive choices. Her passion surrounding a woman's right to choose even led her to become a spokesperson for Planned Parenthood, fighting to enact legislation for the cause she so deeply believed in.

Until the day she saw something that changed everything. She stepped in to help a short-staffed doctor at her clinic. For the first time, she saw on the ultrasound screen the baby being aborted struggling to evade the surgical equipment. She rushed out of the room and burst into tears in the restroom. At that moment, the prayers of her parents and others found fruition. She decided to leave Planned Parenthood. She soon joined her former enemies at 40 Days For Life, and has become one of the most ardent pro-life speakers in America.

There is a particularly telling scene near the end of the movie. The Planned Parenthood office in Bryan, Texas, has closed down. Before leaving the facility to elements, pro-lifers tie a rose at the fence to honor those children who were never born. She herself laments her own two abortions and she says this: "I'm sorry I didn't love you enough to protect you."

She went on to form a nonprofit organization, And Then There Were None, which helps abortion workers leave the industry.

CONCLUSION

But did you know you demonstrate bold love even in the simple acts of life?

- Help someone change a tire;
- Serve at a soup kitchen or homeless shelter;
- Take a difficult neighbor a Christmas present;
- Praying with others outside an abortion clinic;
- Standing with those whom society marginalizes.

Martin Luther King Jr. said the Christian faith is "dangerously unselfish." C.S. Lewis encouraged Christians to forget about trying to decide if you loved someone, just act as if you did. Jesus said that true love lays down his life for his friends.

We must choose to love everyone always.

The ultimate act of love wrapped in courage was Jesus going to the cross. He was sent by God in the form of a human help us see true love, true courage in action. He wanted us to know that our bold, valiant, and relentless love is heroic.

How will you choose to love?