

“Turning Point”
Matthew 14:22-27; Ruth 1:1-18
14th Sunday after Pentecost

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When I was just starting out in ministry, it was the spring of 1998, and I moved from Michigan to Dallas, to begin working at a church in one of Dallas’s suburbs.

Now I knew next to nothing about Dallas...
I knew about the Cowboys. I knew about J.R. Ewing.
And...that was about it.

So a month before I moved, I visited Dallas to look for an apartment. I was told where to find a few good places, but I still managed to get lost.

No GPS back in those days...so I parked my car in a random parking lot, pulled out a map, started flipping pages.

There was a man with a pickup truck parked a few spots away. He saw me, got out of his truck, and offered to help.

Having just moved from up north, I wasn’t used to the outfit this gentleman was wearing: cowboy hat, big boots, jeans that were about two sizes too small, and a belt buckle that looked about THREE sizes too big.

But he was kind—he pointed me in the right direction.
Then he asked where I was from.

I told him Michigan.
He asked why I was moving to Dallas.
I told him a new job.
He asked doing what.

I said I was one of the pastors at a nearby church.

Then his eyes got REAL BIG, and he was clearly excited, and he raced back to his truck and pulled something out and came back and handed it to me. What he handed me was a cassette tape.

He said he was a Christian singer in his spare time. Since I was a pastor, he thought I might want a copy of his recordings.

I looked down at the cassette—and I'll never forget the title:
"Two-Stepping on the Devil."

For a brief moment, my heart was filled with doubt and worry.
Am I REALLY moving to Texas??!

But I kept going...it didn't take much courage to keep going, to move to Dallas, I knew I was going to a good church, and I felt confident in my decision.

I've always wondered, in our Old Testament text today, about Ruth's decision to keep going.

The story of Ruth is first and foremost a story of courage.
Courage that goes much farther than cowboy hats
cassette tapes.

The courage to keep going.

The book of Ruth begins with a famine, causing Naomi and her husband to relocate to Moab.

Then Naomi's husband dies, then her two sons die.
It's devastation all around.

Naomi decides to return to her hometown, to Bethlehem.
But her daughters-in-law are Moabites.
Naomi says to them, "Go back each of you to your mother's
house."

In other words, you'll be safe there.
You have people who love you there.
Go to Moab. Make a new life.

But Ruth refuses to go back home.
She says to Naomi:

"Where you go, I will go;
where you lodge, I will lodge;
your people shall be my people,
and your God my God."

At this turning point in Ruth's life, where did she get the courage
to make THAT decision?

What kind of courage did it take for Ruth to keep going?

The subject of our sermon today is courage.

And I raise the subject because we are in the second week of our
Fall sermon series: Challenge and Response.

We are looking at challenges that different people have faced in
scripture, and how they responded, and by doing so, perhaps you and I

can learn something about our own responses to the challenges of this particular time in which we all live.

After all, it's an understatement to say that there's a lot of anxiety OUT THERE right now: in society, on social media...

You and I are not immune.

We all have fears, worries that have been heightened by the pandemic.

How do we respond with courage?

Let me submit that courage is about three things. I don't necessarily gravitate to THREE POINT SERMONS...but for those of you who like those kind of sermons, today is your lucky day!

The first quality of courage...is about BEHAVING.
How we behave in any given situation.

When the writer Henry James was saying goodbye to his young nephew Billy, he said something that the boy never forgot.

“There are three things,” James remarked, “that are important in human life. The first is to be kind. The second is to be kind. The third is to be kind.”¹

In the midst of all the vitriol that's being spewed in another election season this year, I wonder if one way you and I can be courageous is simply by being kind.

¹ As quoted in Frederick Buechner's sermon, “Growing Up,” found in *Secrets in the Dark: A Life in Sermons*, by Frederick Buechner, New York: HarperCollins, 2006.

A few summers ago, eight friends gathered around a backyard dinner table in Washington D.C., to celebrate family and friendship. The table was set with incredible food and French wine...it was one of those nights that lingered on in a great way.

It was getting late when Michael, one of the hosts that night, looks up and sees, as if in slow motion, a hand, holding a gun, which comes between him and his wife.

The gun belongs to a man, medium in height, no one knows him. He's wearing designer sweats, and he says, "Give me your money."

He keeps repeating the phrase over and over again, harsh and angry: "Give me your money."

Fear and terror invade that backyard.
But there's another problem.
Like many people today, no one is carrying any cash on them.

No one has any money.

The man is insistent: "Give. Me. Your. Money."

But then Christina pipes up. "You know, we're celebrating," she says. "Why don't you have a glass of wine?"

All of a sudden, the look on the man's face changes.
He takes a sip of wine.
And says, "Huh, that's a really good glass of wine."

He then reaches for the cheese and, as he does so, he places the gun in his pocket.

He drinks his glass of wine. He eats more cheese.
Everyone just watches, frozen.

Then the intruder says something that no one expected.
He announces: “I think I’ve come to the wrong place.”

Quickly, everyone responds: “Oh, hey, yeah, I understand, that could happen to anybody...of course.”

But he’s still there, and he still has the gun...and THEN the intruder says something that again, nobody expects.

He says, “Can I get a hug?”
So Michael’s wife hugs him.
The intruder looks around, “Can we have a group hug?”

And everyone forms an awkward circle around the man.
When the hug finishes, he says, “I’m sorry,” and walks out of the front gate with a glass of wine in his hand. ...

After this night ended and people were leaving, Michael found that wine glass—not thrown, not carelessly discarded, but carefully placed on the sidewalk.²

I don’t know how that group of friends did it.
I do know that courage is about kindness.
How we behave toward anyone on any given day.

But courage is not just about behaving.

² From NPR’s Invisibilia Podcast, “Flip the Script,” July 15, 2016, co-hosted by Lulu Miller, Hanna Rosin and Alix Spiegel at <http://www.npr.org/podcasts/510307/invisibilia>. I am indebted to the Rev. Mark Ramsey for calling my attention to this story.

It's also (2nd point, three-point sermon) about believing.

At least for those of us who are followers of Jesus.

Believing, trusting, that God is with us at all times, even when the evidence doesn't hold up.

Do you remember our first scripture passage for this morning?
Jesus sends the disciples out in a boat by themselves.

Then the boat gets battered by waves.
And "the wind was against them," Matthew writes.

So the disciples see Jesus coming toward them, walking on the water. They're terrified! They think he's a ghost!

And Jesus says, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid."

That phrase: "...it is I"—the Greek can also be translated "I am".

Jesus says, "It is I am."

We've heard those words before, right?
Moses at the burning bush.
Moses asks God for God's name.
God says, "I am who I am"...

Do you see what's happening here?

Jesus tells his disciples that even when the wind is against them,
God is still with them....I am is walking toward them...so "Take heart."

Which can also be translated: "Take courage!" (NIV)

I recall Fred Buechner writing about his daughter's anorexia.

“There was nothing scary about it at first,” he says.

“It was just the sort of thing any [child]...might do—
nothing for breakfast, maybe a carrot ...for lunch...”

“But then, as the months went by, it did become scary...

My anorectic daughter was in danger of starving herself to death....”

Like any parent, Buechner wanted to fix the situation. He wanted to give the gift of health and happiness to his daughter. But all the love Buechner could muster would NOT do the trick.

He goes on to say that when healing finally came for his daughter, it wasn't because of anything he did.

On the contrary, what helped the most
was when his daughter was ordered to be hospitalized,
by a judge who did not know her,
in a city that was 3,000 miles away.

“I have never felt God's presence more strongly than when my wife and I visited that distant hospital...” Buechner writes.

“God in his very stillness,
holding his breath,
loving her, loving us all...

the passionate restraint and hush of God.”³

³ Frederick Buechner, *Telling Secrets*, New York: HarperCollins, 1991.

Courage is about behaving.

Courage is about believing, trusting in God's presence.

And point 3: courage is about belonging.

Read the next verses in our Matthew passage, when Peter gets out of the boat and starts walking on the water, he notices the wind—
and as soon as he notices the wind, he starts to sink—
like the wind was going to GET HIM, CLAIM HIM...

Peter got distracted.

He forgot who he belonged to...

A few years ago, our family attended the funeral of my wife's great-uncle, Jake. Jake was 95 years old when he died, he had lived a full life, wonderful man.

He was a WWII veteran, and like many veterans, he did not talk much about his experience of the war when he got back home. But as he got older, one of his adult daughters decided that she wanted to interview her father, and Jake finally opened up.

"In war," he said, "you have experiences you never dreamed you would have and you go places you never dreamed you would ever go. It's not hard to get close to God when danger is all around you. Wanting to get home and marry your girl helps you survive too."

Jake fought in one of the fiercest battles in the Pacific theater, and in that battle, there was a point at which he was under attack, at night, pitch black, could not see a thing...so he just fired his gun where he thought the enemy was coming.

In the morning, there were dead enemy soldiers on the ground.
And Jake was still alive.

I was fascinated to read that story before Jake died.

I could only imagine the kind of courage it must have taken to
make it through a night like that.

But at Jake's funeral, I was struck by something else.
That wasn't the story that was told.

Jake did, in fact, marry his sweetheart when he got home after the
war. The story that was told was how he and Jeannette spent over 70
years living a simple and generous life together.

Jake became a milkman. He was such a trusted person in that role
in his community, it was said that he was given keys to over half the
homes in the town in which he worked. So he could put the milk in the
fridge, if the homeowners had already left the house.

He was a faithful member of his Baptist Church.
He did not seek material gain.
He did not seek recognition.

Leaving that funeral service, I got to wondering...if perhaps living
the kind of life Jake lived after the war is also an example of courage.

The courage of living a life of a million daily decisions.

The courage of living a life that
did not give in to the gods of greed or status,
competition and consumption,
always bigger, always better.

The courage of living a life that treats everyone as God's child.

It seems to me that Uncle Jake made a life out of remembering who it was he belonged to...

Put another way, courage goes even deeper than the choices we make.

It's about the One who has chosen us.

Which brings us back to Ruth.

Long ago, Ruth was chosen by God.
She becomes the wife of Boaz.
And the great-grandmother of King David.

And many generations later, another child is born in that family.
This child is the great-great...many times great-grandson of Ruth.

You know that child.

He's the one who walked on water,
and said to his disciples, do not be afraid.

He's the one who is walking toward you,
in the midst of whatever wind is against you,
and he says, "Take heart...it is I am...do not be afraid."

Amen.