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Speak...Courage

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I was 19 and fresh off a summer as a camp counselor at a Bible camp in northwest, IA. It was amazing. I grew in ways I never thought I could or would and time and time again, people encouraged me to continue in ministry. "You were made for this." "You have a gift." "You should go to seminary and become a pastor."

Cards on the table, when I left camp, I was ready to do all of that, but I had also registered for classes and my major was still biology so that I could be a physical therapist. In my heart I knew where I was being called, but between my ears I believed that the risk was too great.

That's where my friend Mike Wilson comes in. I met Mike my junior year of high school. I stole his spot as a tailback on our football team, if you can believe it, and once he finally got over that, we became best friends and still are to this day. Well, I invited Mike over to my house to hash this dilemma out and he, as he always has, spoke wisdom, spoke truth, spoke courage into that decision.

When it came right down to it, it wasn't about the sunk cost of a year of college. It wasn't about not really feeling called to ministry. It was that I was scared to answer that call because I didn't know where it would take me. Thanks be to God, Mike spoke courage into my story, and now 20 years later, here I am.

Truth is, all of us will find ourselves in crossroad situations. It may be a job transition where you need to take a leap of faith to what is next. It might be the decision to stop or start a relationship. It might be letting the world around you know that you need help with addiction. Or it might be that you know that you need extra help as you age, but you're afraid to reach out.

It is into those situations that we need a friend to speak courage and just as often than not, we ARE the friend who needs to speak courage into the story of our loved one. So, how do we do that and what does the story of two midwives some 3000 years ago give us a template for that work?

What is courage? And what is courage in this story?

I think that we have been conditioned over the years by coaches, Hollywood, and thin stories about the nature of people to have some unhelpful notions of what courage really is. The core of that misinformation can be found all over Hollywood. There, courage is often depicted as the protagonist in a marvel movie fighting the villain and through the process of becoming angrier and angrier courageously fighting harder and harder. There is a reductive clarity in courage in these stories that isn't altogether helpful. They suggest that the protagonist isn't experiencing any other emotions, that they are singularly minded, uncompromised, and the result is a charge on the villain.

For all of us that have lived even a small piece of life in the real world, we know that it isn't that simple, is it? I love what Brené Brown says about courage. She reminds us that to be courageous is to show up with our whole heart and that in doing so, you can choose courage or comfort, but you can't choose both. In other words, to be courageous is to be fully present in all the emotions you have about a situation. Those emotions often come from all over the old Feeling Wheel and are complicated, which makes the whole situation uncomfortable.

So, if you are holding yourself to some kind of courage purity test, here is your official pass to let that go so that when these moments come, you can be free to show up with your whole heart and self.

So, how did these two gals do it?

Let's read the story first from Exodus 1:15-21.

The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, whose names were Shiphrah and Puah, "When you are helping the Hebrew women during childbirth on the delivery stool, if you see that the baby is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, let her live." The midwives, however, feared God and did not do what the king of Egypt had told them to do; they let the boys live. Then the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and asked them, "Why have you done this? Why have you let the boys live?"

The midwives answered Pharaoh, "Hebrew women are not like Egyptian women; they are vigorous and give birth before the midwives arrive."

So God was kind to the midwives and the people increased and became even more numerous. ²¹ And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families of their own.

The word of God for the people of God

Thanks be to God.

Ok, so there they are, two midwives, and the most powerful person in the world essentially comes to you with a directive to kill all of the babies born to Hebrew wives.

Imagine, you're them standing there after the Pharaoh exits. You look at each other.

What are you thinking?

"I have to what?"

"how would..."

You're feeling

"how could I do that?!"

"I hate the Pharaoh!"

"what if I don't..."

To bottom line it – Fear - Anger – Futility - are some of the things you'd feel in this impossible situation. I used to think I wanted to know what they said to each other. The exact words of courage they spoke. But, now, as I apply this story to my life, I'm glad that they didn't because I think the author is giving us space to enter into the story for ourselves in our own moments that require us to speak courage. All we get is the line, "but they feared God, and let the boys live." We get the outcome.

So, if we don't know what they said, then what are some of the factors that went into their ultimate decision that we can take into our moments of speaking courage?

They trained for this.

Nothing was more uncertain than birth in the ancient world. There are no more courageous people in the world than mothers in labor and the people that support them. The reason because courage is a habitus. That is to say that it is something that you practice over time, gaining skills and perspective the more that you do it. Throughout history, the birthing room has been one of the most effective training grounds for people of good courage.

I'm a dad and I have two boys. I remember all throughout both pregnancies praying for the safety and health of the kids and my wife. From afar, it was a marvel to watch her become a mother. Men, I don't know if you know, that the psychological process that women go through is akin to the process a paratrooper goes through as they prepare to jump out of the back of an airplane. Nesting, preparing, dreaming, becoming their best self for a reality that can't be promised. All that is happening.

I remember watching Julie go through all of that and then when the time came, she also went through 24 hours of labor. Because as cute as we hoped our little Emil would be, he also had a giant head. He wasn't coming out. That is when it hit me, if I wasn't where I was, in Fairview hospital, my wife and son wouldn't make it. So, when they came in to do the C-section, I looked out across the parking lot at Prince of Peace and said both prayers at once. The good one and the bad one.

Midwives, doulas, and birthing teams do this literally every day. They take people like me and Julie and Emil I guess and they show up. With their whole heart into a situation that is never guaranteed, and they are the hands that bring life out of whatever the alternative might be. So, of course they were courageous. They had been preparing for this moment their whole lives.

They believed a different story

The other reason they were able to be courageous was because theirs were lives that were soaked in the stories of God's power, promise, and faithfulness. The key thing to recognize is that every powerful person you have ever encountered is telling you a story about the way the world is. And how you fit into it. It's true with your parents, your boss at work, politicians, and Pharaoh in Egypt. If you don't have a counter story, then what do you have to use to be critical of theirs? The people of Israel, Shiprah and Puah, had a counter story. A story about God's power, promise, and faithfulness and it is one that we can keep close today.

Here's a concrete example. One of the Pharaohs that affects countless people today is addiction. Pharaohs don't have to be people to be powerful. Addiction tells you a story about the way the world

works and over time the more, the more you live into that story, the more difficult it becomes to see how the world could ever work in another way. All of you know someone who is battling some kind of addiction. Addiction to substance, work, pornography, digital mediums, to name a few. If you are a friend, a spouse, a coworker, a sibling, or a grandma it can be difficult to know what to do in those moments, but at the core of it is speaking courage.

Many people battling addiction are stuck there because of a fear-driven story that addiction tells them: it goes like this: if you admit that you struggle with this, then people will not love you. You will be labeled damaged goods. The safer bet is to keep hiding, keep using, keep in the dark and keep pretending.

It is necessary then, for someone forged by a different story to enter into your life to remind you what is true. As people living on this side of Easter and Jesus' victory over death, we are people of a fundamentally different story than the story told by the Pharaohs of this world. This world, your friends, loved ones, and coworkers need a people about the work of Jesus commended to us in Mark 16:15 when he said, "Go into the world. Go everywhere and announce the Message of God's good news to one and all.

Why should we or so what?

Like the children in this story, people without a voice depend on us making the right choice. These children, their mothers, and the families they come from are enslaved and their lives, at least according to the Pharaoh, are expendable. The bible is clear on our call to be a voice for people such as these. Proverbs 31:8-9 says, "Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute. Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy" (NIV). Part of our promise as a blessing people includes speaking up and showing up for them.

Like the children in this story, they will learn from our example. I love this quote, "Children have never been very good at listening to their elders, but they have never failed to imitate them." It is impossible for our kids to understand a lot of the reasons we give them for why we do one thing and not another. But, they are masters of imitation.

They are always watching us and how we choose to treat other people.

Because death needs a reminder that Resurrection happened and still happens. The final reason for why we must act with courage is because in a world filled with powerful people claiming to be all powerful, they need to know that death already tried that, and God has been victorious.

I'm so thankful that Mike spoke courage into my story 20 years ago. It's why I'm here today. How will you speak courage to someone in your life? Amen.