

Therefore . . . be bold

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

3rd in a six-part series

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Joshua 1:9 (NRSV)

⁹"I hereby command you: Be strong and courageous; do not be frightened or dismayed, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go."

1 Corinthians 15:54-58 (NIV)

⁵⁴When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: "Death has been swallowed up in victory."

⁵⁵"Where, O death, is your victory?
Where, O death, is your sting?"

⁵⁶The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. ⁵⁷But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

⁵⁸Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.

Ephesians 2:19-22 (NRSV)

¹⁹So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, ²⁰built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. ²¹In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; ²²in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.

Are we ready to boldly embrace the next thirty years?

My wife, Patti, and I first visited St. Andrew eighteen years ago. We never left. We had done a fair amount of "church shopping," but on that very first Sunday, we knew that this was the place God wanted us to be. The people were warm and caring. The pastors were the sort that you wanted to follow. The place was full of energy, goodwill, and Jesus. And, boy, did they think big. The primary worship space was what is now called Smith Worship Center and it was bursting at the seams. So, not long after we got here Robert Hasley, the other pastors, and the lay leaders began to dream boldly, to plan boldly, and to build boldly. Our Sanctuary was, and still is, one of the most beautiful and humbling worship spaces I've ever seen.

We saw that same fearlessness a few years back when the congregation enthusiastically embraced and supported the rebuild of Smith Worship so that we could offer contemporary worship as profound, moving, and God-focused as we have long undertaken in the Sanctuary. Now, the contemporary services are again pushing the limits of the room. There is just no holding back the work of the Spirit in this place.

The people called St. Andrew have continued to think big, understanding that, as a congregation, we have been extraordinarily blessed and that God expects us to use those gifts for the building of his kingdom . . . always boldly, always bravely, for God is with us.

God has always desired his people to be courageous, not because of our own resources or abilities but because of God's. This isn't always the way of God's people, but it should be. Thus, not surprisingly there are many biblical stories we could turn to in order to see a people embracing the bold way. Here's one.

Going forward with God

After Moses' death, Joshua brought the Israelites to the border of Canaan, the land which God had long before promised to Abraham and his descendants. They had been

there before. Forty years earlier, Moses and the people had arrived at the border only to turn back, fearing the people who lived in Canaan and not trusting in God's promises of success. But now, after wandering the wilderness for forty years, God's people had returned. Knowing he would never enter Canaan himself, Moses had reminded the people of their heritage and how God had saved them from slavery in Egypt. He had reiterated God's covenant with them. Moses knew that the people had to honor their past before moving forward with their future.

Knowing their fear of Canaan and the unknown, God spoke plainly to Joshua. In the space of seven verses, three times God said to him, "be strong and courageous" (Joshua 1:2-9). The conquest that Joshua and the people were about to undertake was to be God's work. He would lead them. He would not fail them or forsake them. So long as they lived as God's people, walking in the ways he had taught them, faithful to the covenant, they need not be fearful or frightened. Simply put, they were utterly to trust the infinitely trustworthy God! And the people went forward, across the Jordan, and into the Promised Land.

In the long history of God's people, there have been many such crucial moments. On this thirtieth anniversary of St. Andrew, we are arriving at yet another crossroads. Soon, we will begin talking about ways to keep up with our growth and, more importantly, to bring more and more people here so that might see and hear the Good News of Jesus Christ. Will we fear the inevitable changes or will we move forward with hope and confidence? Will we be bold or will we be fearful? Will we be the church God hopes and expects us to be?

But what is the church?

It is easy for us to forget where we've come from. Americans like to look ahead, not back. Yet, as we consider the future of St. Andrew, we need to take the time to honor where we've been. To remember that we have always strived to be a congregation noted for our warmth and friendliness, for our desire to connect with others so we can all better connect with God.

Similarly, in today's passage from Ephesians, Paul reminded Gentile Christians¹ of who they were now that they had come to faith in Jesus Christ. So he writes "remember . . . remember that you were at one time without Christ" (2:11-12). But now, God has created "one new humanity" (v. 15) bringing together both Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians "to God in one body through the cross" (v. 16). Thus, the Gentile Christians were no longer "strangers and aliens" (v. 19), but citizens in God's kingdom and full "members of the household of God."

This "household of God" is what we mean by the church -- not buildings. In Paul's rich imagery, those who have faith in Jesus Christ are the church, which is built on the work and words of the apostles and prophets with Jesus Christ as the cornerstone of it all. When we rise each week to recite the Apostles Creed and affirm our belief in "one holy catholic² church," we mean the universal church, the body of Christ, the household of God -- to which *all* Christians, *all* those who have faith in Jesus Christ, belong.

To hear the power in Paul's words in this passage, we need to remember that the Temple in Jerusalem was seen by the Jews to be God's dwelling place with them. God's presence, his Spirit, had dwelt in the Temple, but had left because of the people's unfaithfulness to the covenant (see Ezekiel 10). But now, Paul writes, it is the people of God themselves who are joined together in Christ -- a new creation, a new humanity -- growing into a holy temple, the temple to which God's Spirit has returned. What a

¹ All the first Christians were Jews who accepted Jesus as the Messiah and placed their faith in him. As Paul carried the Gospel across the Roman Empire, increasing numbers of Gentiles (non-Jews) became Christians also.

² In the Creed, the word "catholic" does not refer to the Roman Catholic Church, but simply means "universal."

remarkable claim we make, that God's very presence dwells in us, the church, the people of God. Truly, God has been with us. God is with us now. God will be with us.

But how can we be sure of these things? What makes us able to step out boldly and fearlessly? The apostle Paul answers that question in a letter he wrote to believers in Corinth, Greece.

The Corinthian Christians would probably say they were on fire for Jesus, but Paul knew that their enthusiasm was a mile wide and an inch deep. They prized certain spiritual gifts, such as speaking in tongues, above all else. They had concluded that, because it was all about the spirit, what they did with their bodies didn't matter. Besides, their physical bodies would be left behind soon enough. In their fervid embrace of the "spiritual" they had come to an over-spiritualized sense of themselves and of the gospel.

And most astoundingly to Paul, they had even come to deny that one day, all people would be resurrected just as Jesus had been resurrected. Paul knew that their denial of bodily resurrection³ – and there is no kind of resurrection that isn't bodily; it is what the Greek word meant – underlay all the other mistakes they had made. Thus, Paul's entire lengthy letter to them, which we know as 1 Corinthians, builds to the climactic argument for Jesus' resurrection and our own in chapter 15.

In this portion of the letter, Paul tells them that hundreds of people saw Jesus after his resurrection and that most of them are still alive. Go find them and ask! And Paul tells them the great truth that we too can sometimes forget – if Jesus was not resurrected, then we've believed a lie and are to be pitied for it. For if Jesus was not resurrected, there is no Christian gospel to be proclaimed. Paul knows full well that without the resurrection, Jesus was just another failed would-be messiah executed by the Romans.

Further, Paul writes, just as Jesus was raised so shall we all be raised. Paul uses a harvest analogy: Jesus is "the first fruits of those who have died." One day, the harvest will be completed. Paul understands that we are naturally curious about this future resurrected body and in portions of chapter 15 he strives to find suitable analogies, though he knows that the effort will fall short. It is even foolish to speculate. All Paul knows is that as Jesus died and was then resurrected, so shall we die and then be resurrected upon Jesus' return. Our resurrected body will be like Jesus' resurrected body. Like Jesus, our mortal bodies will one day put on imperishability. This is the victory God gives us through Jesus Christ.

So what?

You'd think that after Paul brings his argument to its grand climax in v. 54-57, he would go on to talk about our glorious future with God in the restored and renewed cosmos, the new heavens and earth, but he does not. Instead, with the chorus, "Where, O death, is your victory?" still ringing in our ears, Paul writes, "Therefore . . . your labor is not in vain."

My work for Jesus is not a waste of time? That's the big "so what" of Easter and resurrection?

In a word, yes. Therein lies the reason we can and must be bold Christians. Too many Christians have this idea that we get through this life so we can get on to the next life, where we can leave all this behind and enjoy some sort of eternal, disembodied bliss. However, the biblical story is not about a world left behind, but a world put right. Easter doesn't point us toward some faraway place we imagine to be "heaven," but to the marriage of heaven and earth in this place.

³The "big" book on the resurrection is N.T. Wright's, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*. It is a massive volume with which anyone who wishes to deny the resurrection (or deny that it means bodily!) will have to contend for years to come. Wright's newest book also deals with these subjects and is much more accessible to laypeople: *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church*.

God promises Abraham that all the families on the earth will be blessed through him (Genesis 12:3). Micah brings God's promise of a day when swords are beaten into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks (Micah 4). Isaiah brings the promise of a new heavens and a new earth, where there will be no infants who die young, where lions and lambs will feed together, where people build homes and plant crops (Isaiah 65).

These are all images of God's creation as God intended it. This is the hope to which Easter points us. Jesus' resurrection is the first fruits of the new heavens and the new earth; it embodies God's victory over death.

Thus, Paul's "therefore" of 15:58 makes perfect sense. It is because of Jesus' resurrection that we can come to our God-given work confident that it is never in vain. Easter is the concrete proof that God's victory has been won and that it will come to its full and glorious consummation. Our part now is to press ahead without fail, to do all that we can to excel in building for the kingdom of God. None of what we do goes to waste. As N. T. Wright puts it:

It is a matter of the greatest encouragement to Christian workers, most of whom are away from the public eye, unsung heroes and heroines, getting on faithfully and quietly with their God-given tasks, that what they do 'in the Lord' during the present time will last, will matter, will stand for all time. *How* God will take our prayer, our art, our love, our writing, our political action, our music, our honesty, our daily work, our pastoral care, our teaching, our whole selves—how God will take this and weave its varied strands into the glorious tapestry of his new creation, we can at present have no idea. *That* he will do so is part of the truth of the resurrection, and perhaps one of the most comforting parts of all.⁴

And so we go forward from this thirtieth anniversary committed to boldly going forward for another thirty years proclaiming the Good News in all we say and do, to all who will hear and see. *For if we do not, who will?*

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. The thirtieth anniversary marks an obvious milestone in the history of St. Andrew. It is an occasion of great joy, representing God's grace and the diligent work of so many. As we mark this day, discuss where you think St. Andrew ought to head. How might we use these incredible facilities to further God's kingdom? What does God want from us next? Even more importantly, in what directions might we turn the rich talents and blessings of our congregation? In what new ways will we be able to serve our community and the body of Christ? How best can we truly be Jesus' church?
2. *We are* the church. We don't do church. We don't go to church. Rather, we are called to *be* the church. We aren't even called to become the church. Instead, we are called to live out what we already are! Regrettably, many people have poor feelings about the church. How many times have you heard someone say, "I don't need church, all I need is Jesus." Sorry. The people of God, those who have faith in Jesus Christ, are the church – whether we like it or not! We are called into the community of believers. How do we help people overcome their reluctance to join a church? How do we help people grasp the reality of God's presence with us? What role has church played in your own life? Notice I didn't ask about your faith, but about your church.
3. The resurrection hope is grounded in God's material creation, this cosmos in which you and I live. What is "the work of the Lord" in which we are to excel? To what does God call us? What responsibilities has God given us? Is it only "church work?" What, specifically, are you doing now, this month, this year to build for the kingdom of God? To put it another way, what are you doing in the *present* because of our *future* hope?

⁴ Wright, T. (2004). *Paul for Everyone: 1 Corinthians* (p. 228). London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge.

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Monday, Joshua 1 God speaks to Joshua, who instructs the officers of the camp.</p>	<p>Tuesday, Esther 4 The young Jewish woman must find the strength to be bold and approach the king.</p>
<p>Wednesday, Isaiah 63:9-14 God's Holy Spirit is God's presence with his people.</p>	<p>Thursday, Haggai 2:1-5 It is going to take boldness in large measure to rebuild the temple after the return from Babylon</p>
<p>Friday, Acts 4:23-31 When threatened, what do the believers pray for? The boldness to go right on proclaiming the Good News!</p>	<p>Weekly Joys and Concerns</p>

