

Fear Factor

January 3, 2021

Acts 5:12-42

(Series: Reimagining Church; Message Fifteen)

REVIEW (SLIDE)

August - focused on prayer and waiting...

September - focused on the presence and power of the Holy Spirit...

October - focused on the early church's Rule of Life: teaching, fellowship, breaking bread and prayer

November - focused on the Church's mission

January - focusing on Spirit-empowered leadership

MESSAGE:

**Some years ago there was a television program titled, "Fear Factor" (They put people in glass boxes with snakes, spiders, rats; made them eat bugs and uncooked intestines; put them in claustrophobic spaces; suspended them in the air...)
(Entertainment!)**

I could do all of that stuff! Okay, I could do some of that stuff. Actually, I wouldn't want to try any of it. Fear often keeps us from trying things - especially risky, uncomfortable thing. Sometimes fear is an appropriate response! I don't need to eat bugs. ☺

What are you **afraid** of? Snakes? Spiders? Rats? Heights? (Marilyn discovered on our honeymoon I had a fear of heights when I refused to walk off the edge of a cliff - there were stairs there, but some had been recently replaced - which said to my brain that some had broke!)

Roller coasters? Years ago a group of pastors/spouses attended a leadership conference in S. California. On the one afternoon we had off, we headed to Disneyland and got in line for Thunder Mountain. As you walk down the long ramp into this building - it's an indoor roller coaster in the dark - there are ominous signs: if pregnant, heart issues, high blood pressure, fear of the dark please exit immediately... At bottom of this half-hour line, we get into this car - Marilyn and I side by side and we're off into the dark. Within 15-20 seconds I lost all feeling in my right arm and then - searing pain. I thought I was having a heart attack until the ride was over - and Marilyn let go.

We all want to be courageous. We love courageous people of action - Mel Gibson in *Braveheart*, Harrison Ford in *Air Force One*, Sylvester Stallone in *Rocky* - and want to emulate their courage.

Robert Blood writes: "*Deep within we imagine ourselves a mixture of Patrick Henry, Davey Crockett, John Wayne and the prophet Daniel. But the truth of the matter is, rather than rugged individualists, we are more like Gulliver of old - tied down and immobilized by tiny strands of a thing called fear.*"

About a year ago, we anticipated a New Year – 2020 – with hope and maybe even eagerness. With the news of a deadly virus and its arrival in March, much of our hope turned to fear, our eagerness to frustration. It has been a long, and for many, a very painful year. Many will enter 2021 with more fear than hope.

Our life/faith **grows** in direct proportion to the amount of **courage** we have... So a question: Do we/you have the courage to follow Jesus wherever he leads? And another question: Do we/you have the courage to go wherever Jesus sends you?

The last time we were in Acts together, we contrasted a spirit-directed church with a self-driven church. The passage we considered together ended with 5:11 - “Great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about these events.” The body of Christ was under attack!

The whole church was afraid; while it is okay to be afraid; it is just not okay to stay afraid and allow our fear to keep us from following Jesus in obedience. We’ve just come through the Christmas season (actually it is the tenth day of Christmas today!). Remember when the angel(s) appeared to Zechariah (**Luke 1:13**), Mary (**Luke 1:30**), Joseph (Matthew **1:20**), and the Shepherds (**Luke 2:10**)? His first words are “*Do not be afraid.*” It is okay to be afraid - but we can’t stay that way.

In our text for today, Luke tells us the story of how the (early) disciples’ overcame their fears:

Read **Acts 5:12-42**

“The apostles performed many miraculous signs and wonders among the people. And all the believers used to meet together in Solomon’s Colonnade (porch)” (Note: they are doing “church” in the “public square” where people are constantly coming and going - right under the nose of the religious leaders who told them to stop). “No one else dared join them [they’re afraid] even though they were highly regarded by the people...nevertheless more and more men and women believed in the Lord and were added to their number” (People are being drawn by believers’ generosity, authenticity, character and courage - they are boldly doing what God has called them to do - to be his church - in spite of the probable consequences). “As a result, people brought the sick into the streets and laid them on beds and mats so at least Peter’s shadow might fall on some of them as he passed by. Crowds gathered from the towns of Jerusalem, bringing their sick and those tormented by evil spirits and all of them were healed” (This isn’t Peter or his shadow; this is a move of God based on their faithfulness). Then the high priest and all his associates who were members of the party of the Sadducees were filled with jealousy” (The Sadducees were religious leaders who didn’t believe in the resurrection from the dead. They said life stinks and then you die. That’s why they were “sad, you see” [sorry]. Remember why they handed Jesus over to be crucified? Jealousy. It’s still there. I think that’s why God dealt harshly with Ananias and Sapphira because they were envious that other people were experiencing God more than they were; and they wanted that experience but we’re unwilling to pay the price. That led to disorder

and evil practices. They were not “all in” as Jesus requires his disciples to be.)
“They arrested the apostles and put them in public jail. But during the night, an angel of the Lord opened the doors of the jail and brought them out. ‘Go stand in the temple courts,’ he said, ‘and tell the people the full message of this new life” **(i.e., don’t stop. Don’t hesitate. People need Jesus. God is on your side!)** *“At daybreak, they entered the temple courts as they had been told. They began to preach – began to teach the people.”* **(People are coming at sunrise to pray. They are talking about Jesus and people are listening!)**

“When the high priest and his associates arrived, they call together the full assembly of the elders (70) - and sent to the jail for the apostles **(Big day. Big trial. Shut this Jesus thing down once and for all).** *But on arriving at the jail, the officers did not find them there. So they went back and reported. We found the jail securely locked with the guard standing at the doors, but when we opened them, we found no one inside. Upon hearing this report, the captain of the temple guard and the chief priest were puzzled, wondering what would come of this. Then someone came and said, look. The men you put in jail are standing in the temple courts teaching the people. At that the captain went with his officers and brought the apostles. They didn’t use force because they feared that the people would stone them.”* **(Just like they arrested Jesus - at night because they were afraid of the people.)**

“Having brought the apostles, they made them appear before the Sanhedrin to be questioned by the high priest. ‘We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name,’ he said. ‘Yet you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching. And you’re determined to make us guilty of this man’s blood.’ Peter and the other apostles replied: ‘We must obey God rather than men.” **(Believers are to submit to those in authority except when it directly contradicts God’s Word and Will; they’re bold; they’re putting God first; they’ll accept the consequences”)**

[This is the same] *God of our Fathers who raised Jesus from the dead, whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree. God exalted him to his own right hand as Prince and Savior that he might give repentance and forgiveness of sins to Israel. We are a witness of these things and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him. When they heard this, they were furious and wanted to put them to death. But a Pharisee* **(the other party of the strict rule keepers)** *named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law who was honored by all the people, stood up in the Sanhedrin and ordered that the men be put outside for a while. Then he addresses them: ‘Men of Israel, consider carefully what you intend to do with these men. Some time ago Theudas claiming to be somebody, and about four hundred men rallied to him. He was killed, all his followers were dispersed, and it all came to nothing. After him Judas the Galilean appeared in the days of the census and led a band of people in revolt. He too was killed and all his followers were scattered. Therefore in the resent case I advise you, Leave these men alone! Let them go! For if their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail. But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God”* **(Was this from God? Two thousand years later, we’re still here! Voltaire, the French philosopher (1778)**

said, "In a hundred years, the Bible will be swept from human existence and Christianity will be no more." We're still here! The Gospel is not going away!)
"His speech persuaded them. They called the apostles in and had them flogged. Then they ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus and let them go. The apostles left the Sanhedrin rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name. Day after day in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Christ"
(Awesome. No fear under pressure! That's courage! That's obedience!)

When we long more for the applause of **heaven** than for the applause of **people**, we'll find the courage to **follow** where Jesus leads and **go** where he **sends**.

We need courage to let other people get credit for our work, to serve anonymously, to remain silent even knowing we could win the argument, to be kind to our enemy, to share our faith, to forgive someone who has betrayed us, to step out in faith and give generously and sacrificially without strings attached, to trust God with our children and their future. Courage comes from living life with **God**: the **fear** of God is the only **fear** that can dispel all other **fears**; ironically, the fear of God brings courage.

This is the first Sunday in a brand New Year (2021). 2020 is officially behind us! Yah! For many, 2020 was the most difficult year they can remember - losses of job, health, family members, opportunities and life as we remember it...

This is a new year. Will we have the courage to step into it, lead through it... This month our focus in this Reimagining Church series is on "*Spirit-Empowered Leadership*."

This focus relates specifically to Church leadership; but since we are all leaders - in our home, neighborhood, work, school etc. - it applies to all of us. All of us require the spiritual fortitude and strength of "spiritual courage."

COURAGE BEGINS WITH FIGHTING THE BATTLES WITHIN

The basic issue in dealing with fear is always an **internal one**.

In Acts 1, the disciples' fear factor is high; they feel **inadequate**; they feel alone; they feel **confused**; they feel insecure. They have named their inner battles; they have asked for a supernatural touch from God. And God shows up; the Holy Spirit takes up residence in their heart

What's inside of you that keeps you from facing your fears, from doing what God asks you to do, from doing what needs to be done? What is it that keeps your marriage struggling? Look inside yourself. Growing tensions between you and your children/parents/co-workers? Losing job after job? Bowing to peer pressure? Living from paycheck to paycheck? We need the courage to look into our heart and soul.

The Psalmist (51) says, "*God, you're after the truth from the inside out.*" The first step of every recovery program is recognizing we're **powerless**; Gordon Crosby says the our "first engagement must always be with oneself." We need to stop the denial. We admit our fears and **inadequacies**. We need to confess our sins and **iniquities**. Then God can go to

work in us; and when God is with us, the courage comes.

Remember Joshua. He follows Moses - the burning bush guy. Moses is the Red Sea guy; the Ten Commandments guy; the spoke with God guy. Joshua has to step into Moses' shoes to lead God's people into the Promised Land

God says: We have some work to do - *"Have I not commanded you. Be strong and courageous. Do not be terrified. Do not be discouraged. For the Lord, your God, will be with you wherever you go"* (**Joshua 1:9**).

Satan loves to use *"terrified and discouraged"* to rob us of our joy and effectiveness. *"I will be with you"* (God's Spirit) cancels out all *"terrified and discouraged."*

In the Peace Corp manual for its volunteers in the Amazon jungle, it tells how to react if attacked by an anaconda snake (35 ft. long; can swallow a 3-400 lb. animal). Here is what it says:

1. First, if an anaconda attacks you, don't run. The snake is faster than you are.
2. Second, lie flat on the ground. Put your arms and legs tightly together.
3. Third, tuck in your chin.
4. Fourth, as the snake approaches and climbs over your body, don't panic.
5. Fifth, after the snake has examined you, it will begin to swallow you feet first. Permit the snake to swallow your feet and ankles. Do not panic.
6. Sixth, the snake will now begin to suck your legs into its body. Lie perfectly still.
7. Seventh, when the snake reaches your knees, slowly and with as little movement as possible, reach down, take your knife, very gently slide it into the side of the snake's mouth between the edge of its mouth and your leg. Then suddenly rip upwards severing its head.
8. Eighth. Be sure to bring your knife.

(My response would be much simpler: Don't go into the Amazon jungle!)

Psalm 56:3-4 - *"But when I'm afraid, I put my trust in you. In God, whose word I praise, in God I trust. I will not be afraid? What can mere mortals do to me?"*

Courage begins by fighting (and winning) those battles within.

COURAGE GROWS WHEN WE'RE ABLE TO LET GO OF THE COMFORTABLE

The disciples are on edge; it's hard to pick the fruit unless you're out on a limb. They're doing things they've never done before outside their comfort zone: miracles, preaching, teaching, standing in front of the rich and powerful, being beaten. They are just fisherman, but they were determined to do what God was calling them to do - and that made all the difference.

John Ortberg has a book entitled, "If you want to walk on water you have to get out of the Boat." In Matthew 14, Jesus is walking on water; Peter says, *"Lord, if that's you, tell*

me to come to you.” (I’m thinking, “Jesus, if that’s you, get in the boat”). But Jesus invites Peter to step out of the boat and come to him; and Peter courageously accepts.

I’ve heard people trash Peter - “Man of little faith!” But Peter is the only disciple with the courage to actually get out of the boat. John Ortberg writes: “*Our flesh encourages us to live life in the comfort zone, to do what is easy. But Jesus calls us out of the boat and into the courageous zone.*” Get out of the boat, step into the uncertain, and walk forward with our eyes fixed on Jesus.

Many like their predictable, mundane lives; but that’s not what God is calling us to. God is calling us to move (and move others) from success to significance, from **indifference** to making an **eternal difference**, from letting go of the familiar and join an unknown adventure.

The angel reiterated their marching orders: “*Go stand in the Temple Courts.*” What? Not only will we be ridiculed, we’ll be challenged/tested; it’s dangerous! “*Do it anyway!*”

Walk across the foyer to introduce yourself to someone you’ve never met. Ask to pray for your waitress; bless your cashier; share your testimony with a co-worker; mentor a KidsHope student; lead a small group, disciple a new believer, invite your neighbors to pancake breakfast in your driveway...

Step out of your comfort zone and onto the water where only your trust in Jesus will keep you from sinking...

God will be with you. Walk toward him. He will not let you **sink**.

What would you do with your life right now if you weren’t afraid? (2 Timothy 1:7 - “*God did not give us a spirit of timidity but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline*”). Corrie ten Boom writes: “*Never be afraid to trust an unknown future to a all-knowing God*”

COURAGE COMES WHEN GOD’S VISION AND OUR PASSION INTERSECT

When we have a clear vision of God’s purpose for us in this world and a passion for God...we become a dangerous person. Some years ago, John Kasich was Governor of Ohio and running for president of the United States, when he realized he wasn’t going to win the nomination: “*I have always said the Lord has a purpose for me, as he has for everyone. As I suspend my campaign, I have renewed faith, deeper faith, that the Lord will show me the way forward and fulfill the purpose of my life.*”

It sounds like Peter and John: “*Judge for yourselves whether it’s right in God’s sight to obey you rather than God. For we cannot help speaking about what we’ve seen and what we’ve heard.*” (Acts 4:19-20).

God’s vision for us, if we are his disciples, is to be life changers, history makers, world movers. He’s calling us to step up and make a difference in someone’s life, in the Church, in His Kingdom.

Do we share that vision? Do we have a sense of divine urgency and compassion that will prompt us to courage?

It can be frightening to engage a complete stranger. But if we're really passionate about seeing people come into a relationship with Jesus, we'll have the courage. See...**vision** ignites passion. **Passion** ignites a dream. **Dreams** ignite **courage**.

Do you have any audacious prayers and requests for God to work out in and through your life? Do you have any courageous dreams for this church, for Covenant?

Covenant is a good church. But imagine what God might do here if we simply dreamed God's dreams and followed his Spirit's leading without hesitation and without fear.

I dream of a church that's reaching out to its unchurched neighbors and community...

...a trauma center for wounded people where the broken can find healing.

...a place where skeptic and seeker come and discover they really matter to God.

...a worshipping community growing together in the knowledge of God, allowing the word of Christ to dwell in them richly, being equipped and empowered to go into the world and dispense the grace of God.

...a church with little communities gathering all over south-central Kent county in homes, schools, offices and restaurants.

...a church where marriages are restored, families are reconciled, the poor are remembered, and cups of cold water are regularly provided.

...a church lead by leaders and staff who've come together like a family - one mind one heart to equip and encourage every single believer to use their gift in ministry.

...a church so passionate for Jesus that everyone is willing to put their personal preferences on the shelf in order to reach their neighbor.

...a church wearing out the knees on their pants together imploring God to make it happen here...and now. A church going and growing and blessing...

COURAGE RISES WHEN OUR CAUSE IS GREATER THAN OUR CIRCUMSTANCES

They embraced their call/cause; they rejoiced in the fact they get beat up for Jesus: "That's who we are; this is what happens." Their cause is our **cause unless we're focused on **circumstances** around us.**

Paul wrote from prison: *"On the contrary, everything happening to me in this jail only serves to make Christ more accurately known regardless of whether I live or die. They didn't shut me up. They gave me a pulpit. Alive I'm Christ's messenger. Dead I'm his bounty. Life versus even more life. I can't lose."* (**Phil. 1:21**; msg). Paul added: *"For me to live as Christ, for me to die, it's gain"* (**Phil. 1:21**, NIV).

We have a mission/call/cause. Life is tough. The world is brutal. Circumstances are often unfair. Paul said, *“I believe with all my heart that Jesus Christ is Lord, so bring it on”*

Do you have a cause you’re willing to **live for**...and **die** for? If you have a cause you’re committed to, your courage quotient will rise dramatically. If it is your **circumstances** you’re focused on, you’ll likely to be **discouraged**... and defeated

At 75, Winston Churchill was invited to speak at his Alma Mater prep school. The head master told the young boys to come prepared to take notes - “You’ll hear things you’ll never want to forget.” While they eagerly waited with pen and paper, he was introduced. He stood up. He unbuttoned his coat, stuck his thumbs in his vest pockets, slid his glasses to the end of his nose, and looked into their eyes: *“Never give up! Never give Up! Never, ever give up.”* He sat down. They never forgot.

Luke (5:42) simply says, *“They never stopped teaching and proclaiming Jesus!”* When do you stop? When are we going to start? Do not be afraid! *“We have good news of great joy...a Savior has been born. He is Christ the Lord!”*

What gets us up when we’re down? The same one who motivated Peter and John. We know the **resurrected Jesus** who says: *“I love you. Don’t be discouraged. Get up. I conquered death for you. Be courageous. Be strong. I am with you!”*

Courage is a **powerful** thing. It makes all the difference, and it only comes from living our life in **Jesus** by his **Spirit**.

Prayer: Father, we all know someone who is scared to death - facing uncertainty. As you bring them to mind, we ask that you’ll give them courage. Take away their fear, discouragement, and disillusionment. Remind them you love them; help them fight the battles within; help them keep their eyes on you. You hold the future in our loving arms. We love you, Lord. Amen

By Pastor Doug Kamstra on January 3, 2021
Covenant CRC
7171 Willard Ave SE
Grand Rapids, MI 49548
(616) 455-5120 | info@covenant-crc.org