

Westminster Presbyterian Church
Des Moines, Iowa

August 18, 2019
Isaiah 5:1-7; Hebrews 11:29-12:2

“A Legacy of Courage”
Rev. Dr. Scott Paczkowski

As I tried to think about a story or some way to exemplify what it means to persevere, I thought about a woman who we all know, and that is Oprah Winfrey.

I found out her story and, if you have already heard it I apologize, but some of it was new to me. Oprah Winfrey was born in poverty in rural Mississippi and it wasn't until about a year or two after she was born that her mother – and she had been a single parent – decided that she could make more money up north. So she packed up Oprah and they went up to Chicago, and then in time moved to Milwaukee. At first it was good because they moved in with her grandmother and her grandmother – even by the age of 3 was teaching her little Scripture passages – and 3-year-old Oprah could quote back some of those passages. She said, “It made me realize that even as a young girl I had value.” She continued and everything was good her grandmother taught her. They went to church and experienced life in its fullness. But then, by the age of 9, her mother called for her – and her mother had relocated in Milwaukee – and while she didn't say it, it appears her mother was not as attentive as her grandmother.

Pretty soon, there were men coming in and out of her mother's house, and some of them abused Oprah horribly, between the ages of 9-14. There were cousins, there were other men, and Oprah said, “Even as a 12- and 13-year-old, I just looked at my life,” and she said, “this is what life must be.” How sad that is. By the age of 14, Oprah had already become pregnant and had a child; but that child only lived to be two weeks old and it passed away. Then, at some moment in that recognition, she went back to her grandmother. I'm sure grandma said, “That is enough.”

Between 15 and 18, she rebuilt her life, but she still held so many scars. Somehow she was able to understand, she said, “Even as a young girl, it was like the voice of God telling me that I would make something of my life.” And, even in those awful moments, she said she would remember that voice telling me that I would make something [of myself], no matter how horrible I am. God made that promise.

So, she went to college, and college wasn't easy. So many of the other students – because she was African-American and she was in broadcasting, she went into TV news – they called her “the token.” Rather than fight them, Oprah would just turn to them and say, “Yes, but I'm the *paid* token,” and she was.

She was so good. The camera loved her. She smiled and she spoke, and you felt like you knew her the minute you saw her, and everything she did was like touching gold; and, she was so interested in everything. She learned all aspects of television news and, then, she related to people so well, she moved up very quickly – already to Chicago – and then she switched from news to what she really enjoyed, and that was meeting and visiting with people. And, in Chicago – which was a huge market – they gave her her own show and everyone tuned in. And often it

was pretty wild, because those were during the Jerry Springer times, and I was living in Chicago then, and I wasn't really fond of the show, because it could get kind of outrageous.

Every once in a while, she would do something like she did later all of the time, and have a serious issue and bring someone in who was good, and you could learn from. And, on this particular day, on the air in Chicago, when Oprah was 36 years old, she sat down with a woman named Truddi Chase. Truddi started telling Oprah how about how she had been abused growing up, and rather than fall into prostitution, rather than just torment yourself or hurt yourself like so many who have been abused do, she said, "I learned from someone who cared about me, that I was not to blame for what happened in my life."

And, in that moment, on the air, in front of a studio audience, Oprah lost it. She totally broke down in front of the world and she couldn't even finish, because she realized all that time – between the ages of 9 and 14 – that she had blamed herself for what these men had done to her. She knew intellectually that that wasn't true. She never asked for it. She never wanted it. She was horrified, but rather than deal with the issue, or to face those adults, she internalized it and blamed herself – even into her 30s.

Finally, one day, it took another woman in front of a live audience and on television – millions watching – for her to realize that she still had value, that there was still hope in her scared life, and that she could persevere, because she remembered the Bible stories of her childhood, and she realized if a woman named Truddi Chase could find perseverance and hope, then so could she, and after that nothing could stop her again.

Now we know that she is one of the most powerful women in the world, in any venue; one of the most powerful television moguls of any kind in the world, because at the age of 36, somebody finally said, "It is not your fault. You are not to blame," and she remembered her Bible stories, and remembered that God did not blame her either.

That is what the Scripture was trying to share with the people who were suffering abuse at the hands of the Roman Empire, and other Pagan rulers who were trying to put down the insurgent Christians, in the time of the writing and the sermon of Hebrews 11:29-12:2. It goes back and it does what I said before, when you read the Bible, don't read it like platitudes. You go back and you read the Bible. You put yourselves in the shoes of characters who are in the Bible, and that is what the story did. Remember what it was like for Moses when he parted the Red Sea and the people ran across the sea as if it were dry land, and they had the faith to see the waters on both sides, and trust that God would protect them.

Remember and put yourself in the shoes of Rahab. She had been thrown, like Oprah, into a form of prostitution that she did not want, but was forced upon her; and, still she had the hope and she had the perseverance to want a better life. So she trusted the Israelites. She dropped down the rope. She brought the spies up and she would go on to marry the most powerful man of the Israelites, after he drove down the walls of Jericho, in Joshua, and her life was transformed, because she had perseverance and never gave up.

Every one of them, from Sampson to Gideon, to all the ones named in between, were people who struggled but had hope and did not give up, and found joy in God's care ultimately. And that is something that we need to do. I have so much respect for the first responders after 9/11 – and in the last couple of weeks finally the government followed through and renewed their funding to help them – because so many of them are dying, because they ran into the dust, the smoke and the flames to try to save people on 9/11 at Ground Zero, at the Twin Towers.

I got to thinking about that how every one of those biblical characters ran into their struggle and made it better because, they had hope and they had perseverance. Moses could have lived a wonderful, wealthy life with Pharaoh, but turned around and ran back into the mess to protect the Israelites. He ran into the mess, at the risk of his own life. So did Rahab. [She] risked her own life – it wasn't much of a life – but she was alive. She risked horrible death by helping the spies.

And we, as a church and we as Christian people, run into the struggle. That is why I laugh – not in a funny way – but in an ironic way, when I hear atheists and I hear people laughing about Christians, and saying, “Well, you know, they are kind of weak, and they need a crutch, and Christianity is their crutch, because they can't face the reality of their own mortality. They are weak, so they need something.” I say, “Have you looked at Christian people very often? Have you looked at what Christian people have accomplished?”

Christians throughout time have run often into the midst of the smoke and the flames and the dust to help. Now, you can always point out with any group of people, that there are a few who make a mess – and we have our own history of mess – but that is not God's fault. That's not Jesus Christ's fault. That is not the Holy Spirit's fault when we have corruption. But, by and large, the Church, in its many forms, has done amazing things, as we at Westminster are attempting to do. We are the ones who run into the challenges by going to Seged, Hungary, in the next week. By going to El Salvador on the other year, to provide and care when it is not safe, when it would be easier to go someplace fancy and fun. These individuals are using their vacations for something else that is more meaningful and inspiring.

We run into the flames and the dust when we go and spend our evenings working at Monroe school, because we see that the need to embrace the refugee. The immigrant is more important than hanging out with those who are more like us. We run into the struggle, we Christians, when we have concern for poverty and we work. I just received a thank-you letter this week, or maybe two weeks ago, from DMARC, because between church gifts and individual people who are members of our church, this year alone we have given over \$20,000 just to DMARC, because we have care and compassion for people who are in desperate financial need and are in poverty, that we could have used on ourselves.

We run into the flames when we reach in these and so many other ways; and, I know every single one of you can come up with a ministry that I didn't mention, because I promised my wife that this would be a short sermon today. We run into it because we hope; we trust that we will persevere through the power of the Holy Spirit – and I don't mean pride in a bad way – but we need to be very proud of the work that we do, and we need to share it so that people will never be able to say that faith is a crutch. Faith gives us the strength to do things that other people don't want to do, don't care about, or are too timid to do; and, we do it all of the time. And [its] not

just us, but so many hundreds of thousands of churches around this country and around this world filling the gap, filling the void and running into rather than running away.

I pray to God that we continue to share that message so that our pulpit, so that our pews, so that our churches will be full again – because without us, this world has no hope, and with us we can do all things through the God who made and continues to remake us in that Divine image. Amen.