

“Deliverance”

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Failure is not an event; failure is a judgment about an event. But I see people every day throwing that word failure around, talking about themselves and others, to the point they get scared to do absolutely anything. Failure is a way to think about outcomes; it's our evaluation to something that happened. *We* named it a failure. Often what we call failures are not failures at all.

Jonas Salk developed, as you all know, the polio vaccine. He tried over 200 times – unsuccessfully - before he finally got it. I love his quote: “I never failed 200 times in my life,” Salk said. “I was taught not to use the word ‘failure.’ I just discovered 200 ways not to vaccinate for polio,” he said.

Throughout the Bible there are so many times that people are described as having failure moments and yet, somehow in the midst of what they consider failure, God brought life and hope. How can that ever be a failure? The miracle story of Jesus stepping out of the boat derives its meaning from many Old Testament passages.

I get a kick out of these Christian churches that say they are a “New Testament” church. Almost everything Jesus did had an Old Testament parallel. They [Old and New Testaments] are bound together in such a way they cannot be separated. You can look all of the way to Exodus and find the Israelites and the Egyptians going at it; Moses parts the water and they walk across the Red Sea as if they were walking on water, because they had the faith to cross. And, when Pharaoh's army came to that same water they drowned, because they did not have that faith.

The Psalms built strength and trust when they talk about water: Psalm 77:15 - *When the water saw you they were afraid.* Other Old Testament passages talk about God's trust: Isaiah 43:1-3 says: *When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers they shall not overwhelm you.* (I wish Peter would have remembered that when he was taking his hop out of the boat.) Psalm 69:1-3 speaks directly to fear: *Save me, O God, for the waters have come up upon my neck. I sink in the deep mire where there is no foothold; I have come into the deep waters and the floods sweep over me.*

He knew - the writer knew - what it felt like to be overcome like Peter was, and yet God responded and saved him, and in the same way he reached his hand out and pulled Peter up. We have to trust. That is the only way to make a difference and fulfill our call, and keep fear, worry and anxiety at bay.

One of my favorite writers happens to be a Presbyterian so I use him a lot. His name is John Ortberg. He wrote this book that just happened to catch my eye. Its title is “If You Want to Walk on Water, You've Got to Get Out of the Boat.”

You don't have to be a rocket scientist to know that would work today. John Ortberg said fear is the number one reason human beings are tempted to avoid doing what God asks them to do.

He goes on to say that if you cannot get a hold of your fear you will not accomplish anything, because what God asks Christian people to do is the things that other human beings are too scared or incapable of doing. [You think] Your life is rough? God made it that way on purpose, because God will give you the faith to do the things that others are unwilling or unable to do, because of their fear and lack of trust. That can reframe for you why you have to endure certain things, be put at risk in certain ways, take on tasks that no one else should have to do.

There are many times when I want to cry, “Unfair, fowl!” Those are the very moments that I need to be saying, “Thank you that you have entrusted me with something that you wouldn’t have entrusted someone else with - even when it hurts.”

The problem is that most of us cannot handle our fears. We freeze. We cannot think and over time we become so numb to it that it becomes habitual. When fear happens - over and over again - it turns into worry, and worry is insidious.

John Ortberg says worry is fear that has unpacked its bags, signed a long-term lease in your heart, and won’t let go. Fear keeps us from trusting and obeying God. To live in chronic fear pays an incredible cost physically, emotionally and spiritually upon each one of us.

It takes a wise faith to put fear in perspective. Fear can be a good thing. If you are being chased by a lion, by golly, you had better be scared, and had better flee. But most of us are not being chased by a lion and yet – inside - when the least little thing that happens to us, we react like we are being chased by a lion. Where is the perspective? Where is the moment where we stop and think, “Is my response appropriate to the actions that are happening around me? Do I trust that what I am experiencing is really what I should be experiencing? How can I hand it over to God for the Holy Spirit to guide me through it?”

When I was about ready to be ordained Jill and I got married - my last year of seminary. That was crazy. That is not a nice thing to do to a marriage, but we finished up the last year, she forgave me plenty and we started looking for a church. I grew up in northern Minnesota, as you know, and I said, “Why don’t we find a church that is open and on our way back from Christmas break? We will go interview, just so I can practice interviewing.”

So on the way back, it was early January - the coldest winter - and Jill and I tried to put on a good face. I wore a suit and she had on a dress and heels. We were in a car that did not have a good heater. We froze, but we made a very good impression.

We met with a group and as we were leaving Manitowish Waters, Wisconsin - the people were very nice - but as we were driving out of town a timber wolf ran across the road. Jill turned to me and said only one thing, “I will never live here.” The next week I got a call from northern Wisconsin. (Most of my work had been in urban ministry in south central L.A.) We went to northern Wisconsin. That is how we got our first call.

Now, two weeks ago I went on study leave. I went to Memphis. (It is a lot further away from Des Moines than I thought.) I went down and spent a couple of days in Memphis

and went through the National Civil Rights museum. If you have never been there, oh my, you really need to go. It was amazing.

I had read about Dr. Martin Luther King, but the museum was so cool. The museum is at the place where Martin Luther King was assassinated. The museum starts in the Lorraine Motel where he was standing when he was shot. Then you cross the street and there are two parts of the museum. The other side is where James Earl Ray assassinated him, and you stand in the very spot looking back. So you are standing where Dr. King was shot. Then you go across the street and you stand where the shooter stood and took aim. It is a powerful experience.

I started reading about Dr. King during my week of study leave. I was so moved, because you kind of glamorize someone when they have lived such an amazing, sacrificial life. But what I read in one of his biographies was that he was just like you and me.

I remember a very tender story about his experience sitting down with his new wife, Coretta Scott, talking about what they were going to do with his ministry because he was just about ready to finish school and get his first congregation. It was a little different conversation than Jill's and mine. First of all his wife never said "never" as they sat at the table. [Laughter.]

Coretta was an amazing mezzo soprano. She was known nationwide. They met in Boston. She was from a small, rural Alabama town. He was from the south. They had been educated up north - lived with white family people from different congregations. They loved the north. They loved the freedom that 1950's north United States provided them.

All of a sudden they had three calls: One in Michigan, one in the northeast, and one at the Dexter Ave. Baptist Church in Montgomery Alabama. They said, "We want to raise a family. We don't really know the south. We were teenagers the last time we spent much time there. We don't have to deal with any of that garbage. We are free up here."

But then they asked themselves: "What does God wants us to do?" and they went to the south.

Just a few months after he was called to that congregation a woman named Rosa Parks got on a bus - she was a perfect person to get on the bus that day. She was a woman of faith and integrity, and was beyond repute in the white and black community of Montgomery, Alabama. There were many spots on the bus that day that were open for white people. A white man got on the bus and told her to move back. She had had it. Something in that sweet little lady's head told her not to move and she was arrested.

By doing that, she started Dr. King down the road. They elected him head of this program to boycott the busses. Because he had been there such a short time, he was the one person who couldn't be influenced by anybody, since he was so new. They boycotted. He hoped and prayed that night that 60 percent of the black community would stay off the bus. Dr. King considered that would be a success.

The next day all of the busses were empty. It kept on that way through rain, through intimidation through trial and tribulation.

Everyone, of those people got out of the boat. Dr. King and Coretta got out of the boat when they went back down there to Alabama and every - one of those people, some walking 12 miles to work in the rain - got out of the boat by getting off that bus.

What is God calling you to get out of? What boat does he want you to get out of right now? Is God putting you in a position to influence in a certain part of your life right now? You read about immigration. What are your views and how can you make a difference for what you believe is right? You read about gay marriage. What are the issues that you feel powerful about and might be able to make a difference if you just had the courage to get out of the boat?

Have you wanted to teach again, or sing again, or protest again? Where is God pushing you and forcing a decision upon your life and your heart? Look for it, because I can guarantee you God is doing something to you right now, every single one of you. God wants you to get out of that boat? What are you going to do? Where are you going to go? What difference are you going to make?

If you don't feel it right now, pray about it. I guarantee, in a matter of days or weeks God will answer. I can almost guarantee, you probably won't like it, because it is always hard. It will hurt and God is going to ask of you - as a Christian person - to do what other people can't do - the hard, painful stuff that no one else can do; but do it without fear to the best of your ability. Fear isn't the problem. It's how you respond to it. Ask for help. Get on your knees in prayer and watch how God carries you safely through. Get out of that boat and really start living!

Amen