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Christ Church Mexia
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Courage. Some consider it the most admirable of human virtues. Earnest Hemingway describes it as grace under pressure. Merriam Webster defines it as mental or moral strength to venture, persevere and withstand danger, fear, or difficulty. My favorite is Theodore Roosevelt's explanation. In his 1910 speech "Citizenship in a Republic," he declares:

It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes short again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming; but who does actually strive to do the deeds; who knows great enthusiasms, the great devotions; who spends himself in a worthy cause; who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly....

Roosevelt's words, for me, embody the journey of faith, the adventure of faith, the joy of faith and the gut-wrenching challenge of faith. Because for so many of us, to accept the unconditional love of God and to work towards embodying God's love day in and day out is a supreme act of courage.

The lessons for today paint a picture of courageous faith. It paints the picture of what it means to dare greatly, to allow God to love us and to strive to love God, to step into the arena of faith and to wear the dust and sweat and blood that make for faithful Christian living.

From Isaiah:

Say to those who are of a fearful heart, 'Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God. He will come with vengeance,

with terrible recompense. He will come and save you.'

Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy. For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert; the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water.

The foundation for all courage is God's unconditional love. We could think that courage is all about what we do, but true courage comes from God. True courage begins when we realize that we can believe in ourselves because God believes in us first. True courage is the strength to declare, "God is God and I am not." God is with me and I am never alone.

Do you feel courageous? I don't know about you, but on my average day, courage can feel hard to find. My head knows that God is in charge and that God is with me, but the challenges of everyday life press in from every direction. God may be powerful, but certain things have to get done and I'm the one that has to do them. Decisions have to be made and problems have to be solved. And when push comes to shove, we can feel a lot more lonely and nervous than courageous.

Think on the Syrophenician woman. A foreign woman approaches a Jewish man she does not know, asking for his help. She has to expect a rebuff, and she gets one, "nevertheless she persisted." Because she had courage and trusted in the power of God, her daughter was healed of the demon that was making her ill.

Courage might be possible for everyone else, but your own particular situation sure can feel different. Maybe you've been searching for a job for ages, or maybe you have a job, but you dread going to work every day. All those other families seem so happy and normal and perfect, especially on Facebook, but your marriage is a mess, or your child is getting into trouble. While most of your friends seem to be enjoying life, you're overwhelmed with a terrifying medical diagnosis and have no idea what the future holds. It's easy to have courage when everything is going well, but courage seems like a luxury when you're just trying to survive.

And survival mode is where many of us often find ourselves. Things cruise along smoothly every once in a while, but then something happens and everything goes up in the air. At these moments, we find ourselves searching for answers and signs of hope. We yearn for courage, but we're not sure where to find it.

Anybody watch *Call the Midwife* on BBC? On an episode a couple of seasons ago, one of the characters made a courageous decision to change her life and embark on a new journey.

As she was leaving, the narrator spoke these profound words: "There is a greater gift than the trust of others. And that is the trust in oneself. Some might call it confidence, others name it

faith, but if it makes us brave, the label doesn't matter, for it's the thing that frees us to embrace life itself."

True courage begins when we realize that we can believe in ourselves because God believes in us first. God created us and knows our stories. God is active in our daily life, often in ways we don't even notice. God doesn't often speak loudly or in obvious ways. But all the time, God is speaking to us through quiet nudges and feelings in the pit of our stomach. If we can find a way to settle down and listen, we'll soon see God's fingerprints all around us.

If I open myself up to God's voice about the small things, then I can also open myself up to God's nudges and guidance and wisdom about the bigger things, too. If I trust myself to make decisions when things are calm and smooth, then I can trust myself to make decisions when survival mode sets in. Because while the details of my situation may change, the Truth never changes. While the pendulum of my life may swing widely from calm to chaos and back again, God remains steadfast and strong and trustworthy. While I may lose confidence in myself, God never loses faith.

When faced with a challenge, rather than asking yourself, "Do I feel courageous?" I think a better question might be "Can I let God release the superhero inside me?" We are never going to understand why things happen and we won't ever have all the answers. But God promises to stand with us and nudge us in the right direction. So ask God to guide you. Listen for the nudges and look for the quiet clues. Be attentive, trust yourself, and follow your heart to make the right decision.

No matter what the particular details of your current struggle are, the strength and faith that has sustained you up to this point will continue to sustain you now.

And when you need an extra bit of strength or are searching for the courage to press forward, look up the rest of Isaiah 35. "A highway will be there; it will be called the Way of Holiness; it will be for those who walk on that Way". No matter what, God remains with us. When we struggle, God pursues us into danger and accompanies us along our path. God will never let us go. God stands at our side during the dark moments of despair, and God rejoices with us when the soft glow of daylight returns.

Author Mary Anne Radmacher says it beautifully: "Courage doesn't always roar. Sometimes courage is the quiet voice at the end of the day, saying, 'I will try again tomorrow.'" Keep trying.

Everyday life can feel like a battlefield. Even the strong stumble and every good deed could be done better. But as Roosevelt reminds us, the credit belongs to the one who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood, who strives valiantly and dares greatly, even in the face of trial.

Be courageous. Step into the arena and take a chance. True courage is knowing that because God created you, you are loved, you are sacred, and you are enough. Just as you are.