



MYERS PARK BAPTIST CHURCH

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"Do Not Be Afraid"

*A Sermon delivered by Rev. Dr. Benjamin Boswell at Myers Park Baptist Church
on September 10th, 2023, from Exodus 14:10-18*

On Christmas Day, December 25th, 1939, Europe was preparing for a second World War. Hitler's Army had invaded Poland just a few months earlier causing Great Britain and France to make declarations of war. In November, German authorities began requiring all Jewish people to wear armbands with the star of David and deported 100,000 Jewish people by force. The fog of war was creeping across the continent and there was an eerie feeling that evil forces were plotting genocide in the shadows. No one knew what the next year would bring, but they were sure it would not be peace. Everything was uncertain and unknown. Great fear, anxiety, and dread swept through the land. Yet on Christmas Day, King George VI, would continue the holiday tradition of addressing the British Empire in a live radio message, broadcast from their royal country house at Sandringham.

George VI never wanted to be king, and he wasn't supposed to be. He only became king because his brother abdicated the throne. He was not comfortable with public speaking and struggled to overcome a debilitating speech impediment, which has been immortalized in the Oscar winning film, *The King's Speech*. George was a shy, nervous man who would have preferred to have remained the Duke of York, living a quiet life, out-of-the-public eye with his wife and daughters. Nevertheless, all unwillingness aside, this reluctant ruler and unlikely monarch would rise to the occasion and speak a word to the British people, and the entire world, that was sorely needed in a time of fear, uncertainty, and trouble.

With a few deep breaths, he began to speak, slowly yet solidly. Measuring his words carefully, speaking from the heart: "A new year is at hand. We cannot tell what it will bring. If it brings peace, how thankful we shall all be. If it brings us continued struggle, we shall remain undaunted." Then he recited from a poem written by Minnie Louise Haskins that was given to him by his 13-year-old daughter, Elizabeth, "I said to the man who stood at the Gate of the Year, 'Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown.' And he replied, 'Go out into the darkness, and put your hand into the Hand of God. That shall be better than light, and safer than a known way.' So, I went forth, and finding the Hand of God, trod gladly into the night."



I take great pride in knowing it was this same time in history—an era of unprecedented volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity; when the future was unknown—that our community, Myers Park Baptist Church, was born. No one could have known what the world would look like in a year, let alone three or five when our church was founded. Many believed starting a church in the middle of a war was preposterous at best, or foolish at worst. But our founders believed the sacred sense of belonging that a religious community can provide was the only antidote to the madness of war. So, they took an extraordinary risk and embarked on an audacious mission with no earthly idea of what was set out before them, no certainty, and no assurances they would be successful. They did the unthinkable. Brave and bold does not begin to describe their efforts. They were heroic, valiant, fearless; possessed by a dream. And we gather together on this Welcome Sunday, 80 years later, because they were not overcome by a tumultuous world or the fear of an uncertain future but ventured forth into the unknown.

Our ancestors were forged at the crucible of uncertainty, which is what made us into an innovative community of faith that has always been unafraid to be trailblazers who embark on new journeys, and boldly go where no church has gone before. No theological concept was too controversial to discuss, no social problem too vexing to tackle, no liturgical practice too sacred to experiment with. The brazenness of those who came before is what put our church on the cutting edge of mission and ministry—as the conscience of the South and the vanguard of progressive faith in America. We are the inheritors of a church built by people who could not see the path ahead of them, who had countless terrors to be afraid of, but did not let their fears overwhelm them or determine their direction, form their future, shape their struggle, or jostle their journey. They took a leap of faith. When nothing was certain, they courageously journeyed into the unknown—and thanks be to God they did.

Today, we face a world that is just as volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous as those who were first possessed of a dream. We find ourselves at a new crucible of uncertainty. War is raging again in Europe. Climate catastrophes like fires and hurricanes wreak devastation every week. The ever-increasing epidemic of gun violence continues to be a scourge on land and our children. Greed and economic disparity have made poverty the fourth leading cause of death. Racism, sexism, patriarchy, homophobia, and ableism continue to run rampant in our communities. Fascism seems like it is just one election, one breath, one shot away.



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As for the church in America—waning attendance, decreased participation, financial precarity, loss of relevance, the great resignation of clergy, and of course that dirty word we can't stop hearing about: decline, decline, decline. There is nothing certain about our future anymore as a church or as a nation. Everything before us is unknown. The road ahead looks bleak. But my question to us fourth generation and 21st century members of MPBC is this, "Are we as fearless as our founders? Are we still a people possessed by a dream? And if so, what does that mean?"

Let me be clear. I'm not saying there's nothing to be afraid of. Fear is natural and legitimate at this particular moment in our lives and the history of the church, America, and the World. Like the Israelites in our story this morning, there is a lot to be afraid of. The Israelites had Pharoah's army chasing them down from behind and the treacherous waters of the sea in front of them. They were trapped between a rock and a hard place, between the hardened heart of Pharoah and the edge of an unforgiving sea. No matter which way they turned there was life-threatening danger. There was death before them and death behind them. The choice was either to be slain or drowned—killed by the sword or the sea—to face the watery grave or the wheels of a speeding chariot. They felt like they were in a Catch 22, a lose/lose situation, a quagmire of Biblical proportions. They thought there was no way forward and no way back, no way out and no way up, no clear hope and no good future.

Have you ever felt like the Israelites? Have you ever felt like you were trapped--like you were stuck? Have you ever been in a situation where you can't go back, but you're too afraid to go forward? Maybe it was a marriage, a relationship with a parent or a child, a family situation. Maybe it's a job, a commitment, a loan, a school, or an educational journey. Maybe it's a diagnosis, a medical issue, or a mental health struggle. Maybe it's grief, loss, or pain, a wound, or an injury you received from someone. There are times in our lives when we feel like there is no way forward and no way back. Like we are trapped and stuck with nowhere to go, no way out, no change in sight, no hope, and no future. Some of us in this sanctuary today feel this right now, and it can be one of the most frustrating and even devastating feelings.



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But we can also experience this collectively as a community, a church, a society, and as a nation. No matter how nostalgic we are for the past, in our heart of hearts we know, we cannot go back to the “glory days” of MPBC when the pews and the offering plates were full every week. If we’re honest with ourselves, we know the Church in America will never be the same and neither will America itself. And if we’re willing to get real, tell the truth, and shame the devil, we know that for those who are at the intersection of some form of oppression, there were no “glory days” in the Church or America to begin with. And even though we know we can’t go back to the way things we’re in the past, we also don’t like what the future looks like, do we?

Now somebody out there is thinking, “Pastor, maybe instead of forward or backward, we can go sideways around the water?” But Pharaoh’s army isn’t going to stop coming if we turn sideways. Going sideways would only prolong our death by another minute, or hour, or day. Sideways is not a strategy, it’s just a slower death. And the people of Israel didn’t beg Moses to go sideways, did they? No, they engaged in the oldest practice humans have come up with to deal with the fear and anxiety that comes from a seemingly impossible situation—they blamed somebody else. What did Adam do when God asked him why he ate the apple? He blamed Eve. Find a scapegoat. Find a fall guy or girl.

The Israelites blamed Moses and said “Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you’ve taken us away into the wilderness to die? What have you done to us, bringing us out of Egypt? Is this not the very thing we told you, ‘Let us alone and let us serve the Egyptians?’ we said. For it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than die in the wilderness.” I know the Israelites complaints don’t make a lot sense. They’re almost comical in a way. But can you really expect people overwhelmed by fear to be rational? No, of course not.

The interesting thing about the Israelite’s response to the feeling of being trapped is not that they complained, but how they complained. Our complaints tend to reveal a lot more about us than they do about the situation we’re in. In April of 2016, after I’d been here about three months, a woman came to meet with me and said, “I’m here to talk about all the problems in our church.” I responded, “Oh, what’s the problem?” She said, “You! You and your radical sermons.” So, I asked, “Weren’t you here during Marney and Owens and their sermons?” She replied, “Oh yes I was, and I never understood a word they said, but they sounded like they had the voice of God.” Our complaints reveal more about us than the situation.



Just look at how many times the Israelites referenced Egypt in their complaint and how few times they referenced God—its five to none. In three questions in three verses the Israelites said, “Egypt, Egypt, Egypt, Egypt, Egypt,” and never once said, “God.” It is astonishing that the Israelites did not see the threat from Pharaoh’s army as a spiritual emergency. In fact, their complaints don’t even concern God at all. Instead, they see their experience as a crisis of leadership when in reality they were having a crisis of faith. They blamed Moses for being unwise, dangerous, impulsive, miscalculated—taking them on a wild goose chase into the wilderness to die, but of course, they were wrong.

Egypt was the only name they knew, the name on which they relied, the name they loved. And in their fear and anger over the situation they faced, they named Egypt and blamed Moses, but God’s name was completely absent. The irony, of course, is that their reasoning was sound and their complaint legitimate because if God was absent and not in a active part of their story, then all hope was lost and they had no resources to fight against Pharaoh’s army, no way forward and no future. Without God, even Moses is not an adequate resource to stand against the forces of death that were bearing down on them. Like a lot of us, when the Israelites found themselves in what seemed like a no-win situation, their fear and anxiety led them to paint a despairing picture of reality that only included themselves and the Egyptians—and no God. They’d take God out of the equation, and there is no hope in such a scenario. But that’s where Moses intervenes in the story to present an alternative vision of their situation that brought God back into the equation.

Even though they blamed Moses for the quagmire they were in, Moses refused to turn on the people of Israel or give up on them. They say the leader is the person who blames no one, and always takes responsibility. And Moses’ response to the people of Israel is synonymous with the refrain found 365 times in the Bible, one for every day of the year “Do not be afraid.” Moses said, “Do not be afraid, stand firm, and see the deliverance that the Lord will accomplish for you today; for the Egyptians whom you see today you shall never see again. The Lord will fight for you, and you have only to keep still and stay calm.” Moses refused to accept the despairing picture of reality found in the people’s complaints and instead offered a vision of hope for their future that was staked in the claim that God is indeed alive, active, animated in their story working as the decisive character in their crisis. He reframed the crisis of Israel around the presence, power, and fidelity of God—whom they had not yet permitted to enter the horizon of their struggle. Moses put God back in the equation and with God in the equation everything changed, because God changes the equation.



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When God is not in the equation all we have is our humanity. When God is not in the equation all we have is ourselves. When God is not in the equation there is no way forward and no way back. When God is not in the equation there is death before us and death behind us. When God is not in the equation the odds are stacked against us and we're trapped in an impossible situation. When God is not in the equation there is no way forward and no way back, no way out and no way up, no clear hope and no good future. When God is not in the equation there is nothing to prevent our fears from overwhelming us, shutting us down and stopping us in our tracks.

But if God is in the equation, then it isn't over until it's over— (for all the football fans on this kickoff Sunday) it isn't over until the final whistle blows. But when God's in the equation then things that seem impossible suddenly become possible. When God is in the equation then war, climate catastrophe, gun violence, poverty, and death are not inevitable. When God is in the equation then racism, sexism, patriarchy, homophobia, and ableism are not the last word. When God is in the equation Christian nationalism and fascism are not the final chapter. When God is in the equation Church decline is not the only story. When God is in the equation, another world is possible.

The reason we're so overcome by fear, anxiety, doubt, distrust, and despair—the reason we so often succumb to complaining and scapegoating our leaders—the reason we can't see our way out of the seemingly intractable situation we've found ourselves in is that we've taken God out of the equation. But God is the one who makes a way where there is no way. God is a way maker who builds a path where there is no path. Even though it may seem like there is no way forward, when God is in the equation winds come from the east, waters are divided, walls appear on our right and left, seas turn into dry land. When God is in the equation, something always opens up. But that's not the end of the story. If it were, we'd be left with a half-baked theology that leaves everything up to God and leaves us off the hook—a theology of human abdication where we bear no responsibility for working with God in the process of our own liberation. But when God reemerges in the narrative here God issues a call for daring action. God can lead us to the living waters but can't make us drink. God can part the sea, but God can't make us journey through. When God spoke to Moses he said, "*Nasa!*," which mean "Move!" "Journey," "Go forward!"



Our ancestors faced the crucible of uncertainty, they stared into the abyss of an unforeseen future, they experienced fear and dread of a world that was unraveling by the minute, but they did not let their fears or anxieties overtake them. They were possessed not only by a dream, but by a spirit of adventure. They understood the incredible significance of the moment they were living in, and they rose to meet it. They did not stop, or tarry, or engage in futile effort to go back to Egypt. They girded up their loins, prepared themselves for the struggle ahead, and set off into the unknown, moving forward together. What about us? Time and again, we have proclaimed we are a people on a journey of faith.

To be on a journey of faith requires moving forward--trusting God and each other even when we don't know what's in front of us—even when we don't know what the future has in store for us—even when we don't know the way ahead. The question remains: "Are we as fearless as our founders? Are we still possessed by a dream? Are we still animated by a spirit of adventure? Are we still willing to take risks? Can we still do the unthinkable? Are we still the king of people who are willing to gird up their loins and set off bravely into the unknown? The crucible of uncertainty looms over our lives, our church, our nation, or world today: How will we respond? Will we be overcome by our fears, or will we follow God's call forward into the unknown?" I believe we will because we're going to make sure we keep God in the equation. Because we know that if God is for us who can stand against us? We have no idea what the future holds, but will move forward together because we know if God is with us, then who shall we fear?