

Pastor T.C. Arnold  
2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday after Christmas  
1 Peter 4:12-19  
January 4<sup>th</sup>, 2015

One day a man came across a burning house when he heard screams for help from inside. On the five o'clock news interview the man was asked, "What crossed your mind when you heard the cry for help?" He answered, "I looked around to see if somebody else might answer it. Then I thought, not my problem! But it dawned on me that if I didn't go in there I would never have been able to live with myself."

Perhaps the quality most admired in a person is courage, especially when another's life is in danger. We respect courage more than maybe anything. We love to see people display it. We wish we had more of it. We hope that in the face of danger we will have enough of it. A couple of days ago an article in the Kansas City Star explained how the Christian Church is growing so fast in China that the government is feeling threatened and they are putting tighter restrictions on the people. They were told to take down lights around Christmas time and turn off the lights that shined on the crosses outside of churches. Christians were disciplined severely for disobeying these orders and clergymen were thrown into jail, even murdered. Now, that is courage.

Peter encourages the abused and the threatened Christians in the Epistle text for today. He desires for them to be self-controlled and alert. Such counsel is not new in the long and turbulent history of God's people. For example, three times the Lord urges Joshua: "*Be strong and courageous,*" as Moses' successor begins to lead Israel against their enemies.

But if you find it hard to be strong and courageous, guess what, you are not alone. With many of the Old Testament patriarchs the image of courage is marred by the times when were much less than brave. Even Moses himself can't find enough excuses to avoid confrontation with Pharaoh. He implored the Lord time and again, "*Please, send someone else to do it.*" Gideon obeys the command of the Lord to tear down the altar of Baal, but because he is afraid of his family and the men of the town he does it under the cover of darkness. Jeremiah begs off as well when he says, "*I do not know how to speak, I am only a child,*" as God orders that he prophecy to the people.

Of course, those in the early church, the first three centuries, had great persecutions to deal with. Church members and church leaders alike feared of being hurt or even killed because of their faith. The bishop of Carthage, a man by the name of Cyprian, is said to have suddenly disappeared when times got difficult and life was being threatened. Some said, "What kind of example is that?" Others argued that, as a leader, he should protect himself and, therefore, flee from harm's way. Seven years later, however, when another persecution of the church arose, he was there. Perhaps the lesson is simply this: even those who usually display courage will on occasion lose heart.

So, something so important to the human character like courage, really has no one set definition according to the people. And, according to the Bible, there is no one specific definition for courage given by God either. But maybe better than one definition for courage, it could be called, "the confidence that God will see us through." That's how I like to see courage for us according to God's Word. We are confident that God will see us through both the good times and the bad. I know that we often speak of the courage of men. But perhaps no better examples of courage is given than the ones we see from the women in the Bible. For that reason, men and women alike should take heed the examples of the courage of these faithful women.

Take a look at the courage of the women in the Bible. Deborah was a Judge of Israel back in the early days of God's people. For 20 years the Canaanite army cruelly oppressed the Israelites. Deborah commands Barak a General in Israel's army, to attack. Barak hesitates. He

comes to Deborah and says, *“If you go with me, I will go; but if you don’t go, I won’t go.”* Deborah agrees but informs him that the honor will be given to a woman over a General.

Queen Esther took courage as well. She was a Jewess who became Queen of Persia when she married King Xerxes some 450 years before the birth of Christ. She prevented the annihilation of the Jewish people by thwarting the plans of evil Haman, the highest official in Persia who tried to persuade the king to destroy all the Jews because, he said, they didn’t obey the King’s laws. While anyone who approached the king without being summoned would be put to death, Esther decided to come to him in order to save her people. Courageously she says, *“If I perish, I perish.”*

In more recent times, three hundred years ago, another courageous woman emerged. Marie Durant was 14 years old when authorities told her to renounce her beliefs. She belonged to a Christian group called the Huguenots, a French nickname for Protestants. A very simple request was made. All you have to do is say, “I renounce,” she was told. Marie refused. She was imprisoned in a single room along with 30 other women who also refused. They remained there 38 years, occasionally being asked if they would “renounce.” They not only said, “No!” They carved another word in the wall. *“Resistez”* – resist. Tourists still stare at that word.

In a day and age when religious beliefs are so easily thrown aside if they are inconvenient, such commitment is beyond comprehension. People today may even think it is silly to be like these women – standing up for what they believe – for their Lord. What is sad is our often times lack of belief that, “The Lord will see us through.” Instead of trusting in God above all, we trust in self, we trust in the idea of being politically correct even when we compromise our faith, we trust in anything, it seems, other than God, who promises to see us through to the end, when times get tough and things don’t go our way. We trust that God is against us in these times, instead of with us – alongside of us – like He came to be physically for His people to see in a manger in Bethlehem. How easy it is for any of us to “lack” courage. We often do – to our own detriment.

So Peter says to us in the text, 1) don’t be surprised by suffering and 2) rejoice in your sufferings. Why? Because Christians suffer – they always have and they always will. And also, because when you do suffer, you know that it means we suffer with Christ. The same Christ that suffered all for you. At no other time does the courage of women stand in greater contrast with the cowardice of men than at Calvary. Nothing is so obvious than their presence beneath the cross and the absence of the Twelve, except for one. It is the women who boldly give witness to the resurrection of Christ while the Twelve huddled behind locked doors for fear of the Jews.

Take courage, beloved in the Lord. Each year this gets harder and harder in this post-religious society we live in. Harder it is to profess one truth. Harder it is to be taken seriously when we call ourselves Christians. Harder it is because we are quickly becoming a minority in a world that no longer subscribes to Christian morals as the way to live out our days. All this means we must be “more bold” in our convictions. And in those convictions, it might seem lonely. But you are never alone. “Never will I leave you,” declares the Lord. He provides the strength we need. We have it in His death for our lives. We have it and can count on it each and every day – for this New Year now upon us and for each year after. Take courage – the Lord is by your side. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding shall keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.