

July 12, 2020

[Series] Fear Not: Finding Courage in an Anxious World

Fear Not: Becoming Courageous Leaders

[Deuteronomy 31:1-8](#)

Moses, the fearless leader of the Israelites, isn't going to cross the Jordan River with the people he's been leading for the last 40 years; but he's got one more pep talk before they head out of their wilderness locker room and onto this field described as "a land flowing with milk and honey." Here's the pep talk: "Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or terrified because of [your enemies across the Jordan River], for the Lord your God goes with you; He will never leave you nor forsake you." (Deuteronomy 31:6) That's the pep talk. Actually, Moses gives *two* pep talks. The first is for all the people. But then he gives a second one just for Joshua; and it's pretty similar to the one for the people with slight alterations. Why two almost identical speeches?

Assuming Joshua is listening while Moses addresses everyone else and says, "Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid . . . God will never leave you or forsake you," why does Moses repeat himself to Joshua? He does repeat himself but actually flips the order and adds a different word: "Be strong and courageous . . . God will never leave you or forsake you . . . Do not be afraid." To "Do not be afraid," Moses adds "or terrified" when addressing the people. But when addressing Joshua, Moses says, "Do not be afraid or discouraged." Why "or terrified" for the people but "discouraged" for Joshua?

Certainly, as a leader, Moses knows a thing or two about discouragement. He's been leading an anxious and, at times, terrified group of people. For forty years they have vacillated between gratitude and whininess, obedience and idolatry, trust and suspicion, faith and fear. Truth be told, he's watched them get worked up in a lather more than he's seen them resting in the "Shadow of the Almighty" – as the Psalmist declared in our passage from last week (Psalm 91). Moses has seen way more fear than faith, but if he stood here right now, he'd probably admit he'd been fearful too.

No matter who you are, it's okay to say, "I'm afraid." Fear is understandable; especially when standing in between "what was and what is to come." Wouldn't you say that's a pretty good description of where we stand today?

In his 2019 book, *Carpe Diem Redeemed*, Os Guinness says, "All across the world the dominant emotion in the global era is fear. With everything interconnected, no one seemingly in charge, events appearing out of control, and individuals feeling overwhelmed by the scale and speed of

the problems, fear is real and far from irrational." (*Carpe Diem Redeemed* by Os Guinness) And that was in 2019 before all this craziness happened.

Fear is real and understandable . . . for everyone; but also (maybe especially) for leaders. Why is that? People are anxious (terrified even) of the unknown. A leader's job is to help people journey from where they are/have been to an uncertain destination – the unknown – which causes a lot of anxiety in people. Courage is necessary when leading anxious people, because we least want to be led when we are anxious. When we are anxious our tendency is to stay put, remain stuck, dig in our heels, fight back, deflect responsibility. "Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid." Everyone needs to hear that. Joshua also needed to hear "do not be dis-couraged, " because leadership can be discouraging. Maybe you need to hear that too.

You don't have to be the president of a country or company to be a leader. You don't have to be a pastor or a school principal either. Moms and dads lead families. Friends lead conversations and give direction their peer group. Volunteers lead other volunteers for non-profits. Teachers lead classrooms and students lead their peers – in the classroom and on the field. Most of us are leading in some way every day. And most of us get discouraged as we attempt to lead others, right?

To Joshua, and to us, Moses says, "Don't be afraid or discouraged." DIS-couraged; cut off from courage. So where does courage come from? And how do we lose it; get cut off from it?

For those who follow Christ and lean into God's Word for truth about life, we are told that courage comes – not by mustering up courage on our own (like *The Little Engine That Could*) or by being inspired through the 'just right' words of a leader's pep talk – but by remembering what God has done. When God is giving Moses a pep talk prior to chapter 31, He reminds Moses of how He led the people to defeat King Sihon and King Og (see Deuteronomy 29:7). So Moses, in his pep talk to the people reminds them of the same thing. "And the Lord will do to them what He did to Sihon and Og, the kings of the Amorites, whom He destroyed along with their land." (Deuteronomy 31:4)

Don't be dis-couraged. Even though you don't yet see HOW God will make a way for you, fight for you, be your strength and deliver you, you can look back and see how He has done it in the past. Courage comes as we REMEMBER. When it comes to bolstering courage in the Church, we celebrate communion and remember the costly victory of Jesus; we remember the testimony of scripture – Old and New Testaments – that God doesn't walk away from His people; and we look back on our own life's journey and create a testimony of God's faithfulness while listening to the testimony of others as well. It's good to remember what God has done: in Christ, for His people throughout scripture, and in our own lives and the lives of others. Courage comes, grows,

and is sustained as we keep looking back to remember/see and declare that God really doesn't "leave us or forsake us."

So that's how courage grows: by remembering God's faithfulness. How is it that we get DIS-couraged? How is courage diminished?

We stop focusing on the faithfulness of God and take our cues from the people around us and the people we're leading; which is a recipe for discouragement and disaster. When we lead, we get criticized; by someone, in some way. People doubt that we know what we're doing and where we're going. In their fear and anxiety, people want clearer and quicker results. Nobody likes being in between what they've known in the past and where they're going to end up in the future. So in their anxiety they lash out. 'Moses, you just brought us out here in the desert to kill us.' 'Moses, we were better off in Egypt.' 'Moses, we had manna yesterday and the day before. We want meat to eat.' 'Moses, how much longer until we get to the Promised Land?' Ask any parent who has had the courage to plan for, pack for, and pay for a family vacation, [ask them] if they ever got discouraged when their kids or spouse criticized or complained about the itinerary, the accommodations, or the food. Leading can be so discouraging.

And sometimes people just don't like to be led; and they don't seem to like us . . . or the direction we are headed. And so – in our discouragement – we give up. Moses is saying to Joshua, "Don't give up! God has chosen you to lead His people and help them settle and divide this Promised Land. They need you . . . but they won't always tell you that, or make you feel needed. Don't be afraid and do not be discouraged. God is with you and God will lead you."

Leadership is hard work. It can be discouraging. It requires Patience and Persistence, and our world seems to be lacking both these days. In the book about redeeming time I mentioned earlier, Os Guinness reminds us that a Jewish and Christian understanding of leadership and change must be "long-term" and "incremental." He writes, "To partner with God and serve His purposes in the world assumes and requires change, but whether the change is personal and individual or social and political, change takes time because changing the heart is essential." (*Carpe Diem Redeemed* by Os Guinness) Changing hearts – yours and mine – requires patience and persistence. Just ask God. Leadership of any kind and at any level requires these two characteristics – Patience and Persistence –and they are in short supply. For those in Christ, patience and persistence (which could also be called faithfulness) are actual fruits of the Spirit listed in Galatians 5:22-23. That means they originate from and grow because of God's activity in us. They are supernatural, not fabricated by us. We have a version of what we call patience and persistence. It's an impressive 'knock-off' in many ways, but not the same thing as the fruit that is born of the Spirit. How do you know the difference? Here are a couple of questions:

What's the difference between patience and giving in to paralyzing fear or people-pleasing?

What's the difference between persistence and stubbornness – or an unwillingness to admit we are wrong or have failed?

This can be tricky to sort out. I would say discovering if we are being patient and persistent is between you and God, and a few trusted friends who are loving enough and honest enough and patient enough to help you sort that out along the way.

But even if we get the patience and persistence (faithfulness) thing just right, we will still face discouragement along the way; and the people we love and lead won't be an endless source of encouragement. The only source of continual, never-ending, always consistent encouragement comes from the love, presence, power and faithfulness of the God who will "never leave us or forsake us." The God who, in the end, wins and drives away all fear.

It didn't look like God had won when they nailed His Son to a cross. Talk about DIS-couragement. His followers lost every ounce of courage they had. They grieved, they hid, and they just about gave up. But then the One who said, "Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not let them be afraid" (John 14:27) defeated death and came to their rescue. The God of Angel Armies was right by their side, once again. He had, in fact, "never left them or forsaken them."

"Do not be afraid and do not be discouraged." Os Guinness reminds us, "Evil may run rampant, accidents will happen, disappointments and setbacks may dismay the best of us, and at times there may seem to be no meaning to it all. But there is always...the tirelessly repeated reassurance that is backed by a thousand reasons: 'Have no fear.' " (*Carpe Diem Redeemed* by Os Guinness)