

“Courage”

1 Thessalonians 2:1-8 Courage

Pent 24A OCT 26 2008

CHILDREN: In the Wizard of Oz, each of Dorothy’s companions needed something vital that had been missing from their lives. The Scarecrow needed a brain, the Tin Woodman needed a heart, and the Cowardly Lion needed courage. The Wizard promises to give them what they need only if they can defeat the Wicked Witch of the West. At the end of the movie, Dorothy and her friends present the Wizard with the witch’s broom as evidence of their success. So with great ceremony, the Wizard gives the Scarecrow a college diploma. He gives the Tin Woodman a ticking clock. And he gives the Cowardly Lion a medal for bravery. Of course, the people watching the movie have seen along the way that the Scarecrow already has lots of wisdom, the Tin Woodman already has a beautiful heart, and the Cowardly Lion has more courage than he ever imagined. Is there anything in you that you think you don’t have, but that God has already supplied?

One Christmas I received the gift of a book. At the age of eleven I have to tell you that a book was not the most exciting gift to find under a Christmas tree. I was more interested in the battery-powered robot, a train set, and a tape recorder. But there it was, a book, neatly wrapped, and with my name on it. When I opened it I expected some sort of boy’s adventure story, but it was something completely unexpected, “*Profiles in Courage*”, a very adult looking book for an eleven year-old. Have some of you heard of this book, “*Profiles in Courage*”? Who wrote it? Yes, President John F. Kennedy. My parents did not vote for Kennedy in 1960, but after his tragic assassination in 1963 they began to think so much of him that they gave me that book.

Yes, I read the book. I can’t tell you all the details of what President Kennedy wrote, but the general summary is that he told about different senators in different periods of our nation’s history, who found the courage to make tough political decisions even though it cost them their friends, their position and their reputation. The first story was about Senator John Quincy Adams, who upon being elected senator, as a matter of conscience, broke with the Federalist Party that elected him and became a Jeffersonian Democrat. All of his Federalist friends told him that if he changed parties his career as a politician would be over, but Adams did it, and later became the nation’s 6th president. I wonder why it was that my parents gave me that book? Was it a way of honoring President Kennedy after the assassination? Or were they hoping that their son would demonstrate courage as he grew up? What do you think, do I have courage? Would you think of me as a courageous person? Well, with Adams as a reference point on courage, I changed my party affiliation along the way. However, I don’t seem to be on track to become president! The closest I’ve come so far was winning two write-in votes for County Coroner in the South Byron election district some years ago. One of the votes was mine, and the other was my son Roberto.

I remembered “*Profiles in Courage*” as I studied the line from the Letter to the Thessalonians, where Paul writes “*Our God gave us courage*”. He doesn’t say “*God gave me courage*”, he says “*God gave us courage*”. What do you think, has God given you courage? Has our church encouraged you to live courageously? Is courage an important part of your faith? Would people in the community think of a word like “courage” when the name of our church is mentioned?

Whether or not we have been a courageous church in the past today I will make a prediction that we will need to be more courageous in the months and years to come. I heard Paul Krugman on PBS Wednesday night – he just won the Nobel Prize for Economics, so I guess he knows something about the economy - and he stated that the economy unraveling after years of deregulation and unrestrained greed will take years to heal. My Dad told me that he has lost 40% of the value of the investments it has taken him a lifetime of hard work to earn. While some commentators urge us to sit tight, because the market will come back, my Dad at 86 years old won’t have that luxury.

So when Paul Krugman was talking I was listening. I was paying close attention. It got me thinking that if he is right that the economy will take a long time to recover, our church is going to need to be courageous, very courageous in coming years. We will be ministering to more people than before, who won't have enough food, won't have enough money to buy clothes and school supplies for children, who may lose their jobs, who may lose their homes, who may be unable to afford medical treatment. And our church will be challenged to respond with help and hope.

When our Stewardship Committee met this week to shape the 2009 budget it felt like a daunting task – can we expect the same level of financial support from our members in 2009 that we've had in 2008? What will happen if our investments don't do well next year? Can we keep up if our expenses are higher next year, for gas and electric and other things?

We have every reason to be cautious about finances, but here's Paul talking about courage. Where can we find courage like that? But consider this: maybe we've already been given the courage we need – like the Lion – but we haven't realized it yet. It's there, a God-given gift, but we haven't learned how to tap into that gift ... yet. I wish you could have been there to overhear the discussion at the Stewardship meeting. Stewardship is not digging deep to pay the church's bills, it is discovering and using and celebrating what God has already planted in us.

How will you know if you have courage? You have to take risks. You have to take on challenges even when you lack the resources you think you will need to complete the task. You have to be willing to step out of the routine. You have to cross boundaries.

Jesus teaches that we need to love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, and also to love our neighbor. It's easy enough to talk about it. Where courage comes in is DOING it.

Paul says it, "Our God has given us courage".