

Lead Courageously **Exodus 1:15–21 / Judges 4:4–9 / Ephesians 6:10–13**

Today is Mother's Day. We learn many things from our mothers, don't we? I once read a few jokes that begin with the phrase, "My mother taught me..."

"My mother taught me religion, saying, 'You better pray that spot comes out of the carpet.'"

"My mother taught me logic, saying, 'If you fall out of that swing and break your neck, you're not going shopping with me.'"

"My mother taught me justice, saying, 'One day you'll have kids, and I hope they turn out just like you!'"

They are jokes, of course, but they also reveal something true. Many of us have learned wisdom for life from our mothers. So today, we give thanks for all the mothers and mothering figures who have loved, nurtured, and raised children with care.

For the past three weeks, we have been reflecting on the vision statement of the United Methodist Church: "Love boldly, serve joyfully, and lead courageously." Today is the final week of this series, and we are reflecting on what it means to lead courageously.

Originally, the Scripture connected to this theme was from Joshua. Joshua leads the people into the Promised Land and tells them not to be afraid, but to be strong and courageous. It is a powerful story of courageous leadership.

But today is Mother's Day. So I found myself asking: Why does our example of courageous leadership always have to be a man? Traditionally, courage has often been treated as a virtue expected of men, not necessarily of women. But when we read Scripture and look carefully at history, we discover that courageous women—and courageous mothers—have often changed the world.

Courageous and Wise

Think about the two midwives in Exodus. Pharaoh, the most powerful ruler of the time, commanded them to kill every Hebrew baby boy at birth. If they disobeyed Pharaoh's order, they could have been killed themselves. But Scripture says, "They did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but they let the boys live." Quietly, but courageously, they resisted an unjust command. When Pharaoh summoned them and questioned them, they answered wisely. They said that the Hebrew women were stronger than Egyptian women and gave birth before the midwives arrived. That is the ancient biblical version of 'the dog ate my homework.' It was a creative, wise, and slightly hilarious way to run circles around a tyrant. It reminds us that leading courageously doesn't always require a sword; sometimes, it just requires a very quick wit and a solid 'plan B.'

But the reason they were able to make this choice was that they feared God. That means they gave more weight to the will of the God who creates and protects life than to the terrifying command of Pharaoh. But I also believe they were able to make this choice because they deeply understood the hearts of mothers. They knew the joy and pain of childbirth. They had seen mothers weep over children they had lost. In a time when infant mortality was high, they must have witnessed many mothers' tears. Because they knew the joy and sorrow of mothers, how could they casually kill another mother's child? So they took a courageous risk. They chose life.

To lead courageously means that we do not turn away from those who are suffering beside us. Sometimes, even when there may be a cost, even when there may be danger, courageous leadership means saying "No" to unjust orders and powers that destroy life. It means

standing against unjust systems that exploit, exclude, and harm people. It means carrying a courageous hope—a hope that does not give up, a hope that resists despair, a hope that keeps searching for a way to live in solidarity with those who suffer. That is what it means to lead courageously.

Now, this does not mean everyone has to go out into the streets and protest. There are many ways to lead courageously. Sometimes, simply sharing warmth with those who are considered “the least of these” can guide someone back toward life.

Last Monday and Tuesday, I attended a gathering of the Korean Peace Committee of the United Methodist Church. It was a joy to meet colleagues who are committed to the work of peace that Jesus taught us. At this gathering, leaders from Korea joined us from an organization called “People Standing with the Suffering.” This organization is rooted in the Methodist spirit of social holiness. It serves people who are marginalized and forgotten by society.

During this visit, the chair of “People Standing with the Suffering” brought a handmade fountain pen and presented it to the chair of the Korean Peace Committee on behalf of the families of the Sewol Ferry tragedy. On April 16, 2014, the Sewol Ferry sank in Korea. Three hundred and four people died, and 250 of them were students from the same high school. They were on a field trip. After the tragedy, the families asked for the truth to be investigated. But their voices were often obstructed, dismissed, and silenced by the government.

During that time, when grieving families were being pressured to remain silent, the Peace Committee invited several family members to the United States so that people could hear their stories. Those families later shared how deeply grateful they were for the welcome, kindness, and hospitality they received during that journey. One mother who had lost her child said that the love she received at that time helped her overcome the temptation of death.

Think about that. It was not some grand or heroic action. People simply invited them. They spent time with them. They shared meals. They listened. They offered comfort. But for people standing in the middle of suffering, even a warm word, even the warmth of love, can help them rediscover hope for life.

We are all called to bear witness to the gospel through our words and our lives, so that people in suffering may experience this kind of life-giving love. To do that, we need to practice stepping beyond the narrow boundaries of our own lives. We need to practice facing the places of suffering in the world instead of turning away from them. And when necessary, we need to rise up like Deborah and lead with courage.

Lead Courageously

In the time of the judges, one of the most important qualities expected of a judge was the ability to lead people in crisis. Many of the judges in the Book of Judges were military leaders. But Deborah was different. She was the only woman named as a judge in Israel. She sat under the palm tree, listened to the concerns of the people, discerned the will of God, and helped a fearful people move forward.

In a time of crisis, she became a leader who raised up the people with the wisdom of God. And throughout history, we find many women like Deborah. Do you know who the first woman to serve in a presidential cabinet in American history was? Her name was Frances Perkins. She served for twelve years under President Franklin D. Roosevelt and became one of the central figures of the New Deal.

The root of her courageous leadership was that she refused to ignore people who were suffering. As a young woman, she saw workers being injured and killed in dangerous working

conditions. Especially after witnessing a factory fire and the deaths of workers, something broke open in her heart. It wounded her deeply, but it also gave her a clear sense of calling. She once said, “I came to Washington to work for God, FDR, and the millions of forgotten, plain common workingmen.” And she worked for worker safety, fair wages, the end of child labor, and the creation of Social Security to protect older adults from poverty. What she did was not flashy. But it changed the lives of countless people. Like Deborah, Frances Perkins listened to the suffering of her time. She helped change systems. She showed courage by protecting the lives of the vulnerable.

As Christians—and particularly as Methodists—our calling is to lead courageously as we discover new ways to be God’s people at work in the world. Our calling is to lead courageously as we humbly follow the One who sends us out to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

And this is where Paul’s words in Ephesians speak to us. Paul tells us to “put on the whole armor of God.” But the armor of God is not armor for attacking others. It is not equipment for aggression. It is the equipment of love that strengthens our souls so that, in this harsh world, we do not give up on love. It is the equipment of grace that helps us keep protecting the value of life until the end.

My beloved Asbury family, today we have seen courage through the lives of the Hebrew midwives, Deborah, and Frances Perkins. Their courage did not come from great power. It began with a heart that treasured one life. It began with a heart that refused to turn away from suffering. It began with a mothering heart that wanted to wipe away the tears of those who suffer. Courageous leadership often begins in small ways: treasuring life, refusing to turn away from suffering, and trusting that God uses ordinary people.

So do not say, “I am too ordinary.” Do not say, “I cannot make a difference.” When you choose life, when you stand with the vulnerable, when you refuse to give up on love, you are already leading courageously.

May God give us the wisdom of the midwives, the courage of Deborah, and the compassion of every mothering heart that refuses to let suffering have the final word. And may we go from this place ready to love boldly, serve joyfully, and lead courageously. Amen.