

“A Faith Worth Living For”
Joshua 24:1-15
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As I thought about my sermon title for today, “*A Faith Worth Living For*,” 2 sayings immediately came to mind: First, an old saw: “If you were arrested for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?” The other: a quote from Martin Luther King: “I submit to you, if a man isn’t willing to die for something, he isn’t fit to live.”¹ A woman either.

The news is full of people besides King who have been arrested, convicted, and/or given their lives for something important: Last week we remembered the 3,000+ persons who lost their lives as a result of the attacks on 9/11. Despite that terrible loss of life, those among the 3,000 we remember best are the firefighters and police officers who gave their lives trying to spare others. Every Memorial Day we remember the heroes of all of America’s wars, who “gave the full measure.” I still remember how I felt a few years ago standing among thousands of white crosses at the American Cemetery above Omaha Beach in Normandy.

When noted Disciple preacher Fred Craddock was at youth camp in a circle holding hands and singing “Are Ye Able? Said the Master,” Fred thought, “I am able, I am able” and saw himself dying a glorious death for his faith. He thought, “I can drink the cup, I can bear the burden.” When he drank the cup, he thought it would be in one mighty gulp. Instead he

realized “drinking the cup” meant, drinking it sip-by-sip, day-by-day, and living a life that wasn’t particularly glorious.”²

We all have probably imagined at one time or another dying some glorious death; after all, isn’t it better going down in flames for some great cause than dying a lingering death? But the reality? We are all asked not to die a glorious death, but to live faithfully day-by-day.

Donald Miller says in his book *“Blue Like Jazz,”* “[My friend] Andrew would say that dying for something is easy because it is associated with glory. Living for something, Andrew would say, is the hard thing. Living for something extends beyond fashion, glory, or recognition. We live for what we believe.” Miller adds, “If Andrew the Protester is right, if I live what I believe, then I don’t believe many noble things. My life testifies that the first thing I believe is that I am the most important person in the world. My life testifies to this because I care more about my food and shelter and happiness than about anybody else.”³

Last week we began this 4 week series on Evangelism. As René pointed out, the word “Evangelism” has gotten a bad reputation, despite its noble literal meaning: “Good message.” We associate “Evangelists” with dogmatic, bigoted preachers of the Religious Right, who seem to spew nothing but God’s wrath. They’re the last people on earth we want to be like! In the book *UnChristian*, author David Kinnaman highlights a number

of troubling statistics from an extensive study by the Barna Research Group of those born between 1965 and 2002. Included are 2 statistics that show how those outside the church view those within: Nearly 9 of 10 young outsiders said that the term "judgmental" accurately describes present-day Christianity. So, people identify Evangelism with being judgmental with the result that Evangelism has become a dirty word in most people's lexicons.

Yet, as René pointed out, quoting Paul, "*How are people to believe in one of whom they have never heard? How are they to hear without someone to proclaim him?*"⁴ How are people to know of God's love except for ordinary people living as evangelists and proclaiming the good news?

When I think of "proclaiming the good news," I automatically think of passing the gospel on by word of mouth. Trouble is: Preaching the gospel doesn't carry the freight it once did, if it ever did. St. Francis of Assisi once said, "Preach always, if necessary use words." He lived what he preached: giving up family riches, then living simply & caring for the sick & the poor. After visiting several years ago many beautiful cathedrals in Italy, including St. Peter's in Rome, the place where I was most deeply moved was the chapel of St. Francis's tomb in the humble undercroft of an Assisi church.

Today lots of folks are like Eliza Doolittle in the musical "*My Fair Lady*," when she recoils that all her teacher Henry Higgins cares about is "words, words, words," with so little action to back them. "Don't speak of

love,” she sings, “SHOW ME!” Today people aren’t much impressed by what we Christians say we believe, but whether we live what we believe.

Jim Petersen tells the story of Mario, a friend from South America, with whom he had studied the Bible for 4 years before Mario became a Christian. The Bible studies reflected the fact that Mario was a Marxist intellectual who'd read all the leading Western philosophers. Two years after his conversion, Mario and Jim were reminiscing: "Do you remember what it really was that made me decide to become a Christian?" Mario asked.

Petersen thought of all their Bible studies and philosophical discussions. Mario's reply took him by surprise. "Remember that first time I stopped by your house? I had a bowl of soup with you and your family. As I sat there observing you, your wife, and your children, and how you related to each other, I asked myself, 'When will I have a relationship like this with my fiancée?' When I realized that the answer was 'never,' I concluded I had to become a Christian for the sake of my own survival."

Petersen did remember the occasion. He remembered his children behaving badly and his frustration at having to correct them in front of Mario. Yet Mario saw the grace of Christ binding that family together. Years later, Petersen would comment on this incident:

We tend to see the weaknesses and incongruities in our lives, and our reaction is to recoil at the thought of letting outsiders get close enough to see us as we really are. Even if our assessment is

accurate, it is my observation that any Christian who is sincerely seeking to walk with God, in spite of all his flaws, is reflecting something of Christ.⁵

Joshua in today's passage understood this connection between belief and living what we believe when he told all Israel, "*As for me and my house, we shall serve the Lord.*" He understood the constant schizoid temptation Jews were under to try to serve God, but also try to serve the gods of their non-Jewish neighbors. For Joshua being Jewish meant living out a distinctive identity from all of Israel's pagan Canaanite neighbors. It's why Joshua recites practically all of Israel's history, including their pivotal escape from Egyptian slavery and 40 year sojourn in the Wilderness. To Joshua "*no people on earth have a God so near.*"⁶ We Christians, descendents of Jews, believe the same in the person of Jesus. Because we believe, like Joshua, that God has "brought us safe thus far," we know a certain way of living is required of us. It is "*to love God with all our heart, mind, strength and soul*" and "*to love our neighbor as ourselves.*"⁷ It is to do as God requires, as the prophet Micah says, and "*to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with our God.*"⁸ Is this what other family members, friends, co-workers, and strangers see in us Christians? Can they tell from our behavior and attitudes that "*we serve the Lord?*"

We know only too well that in more respects than we care to admit, we often try to serve today's Canaanite gods of financial, commercial, and

material success, of popularity and physical attractiveness, while giving an occasional spiritual nod to God. “Too often we try to live by half choices where we have no absolute standard against which all our choices are measured.”⁹ This fence-sitting, half-loyalty to anything and everything is worsened in our country where “the pursuit of happiness” is practically legislated in our nation’s Constitution. This stands in direct contradiction to the essence of our faith in Jesus’ statement: “*What does it profit to gain the whole world, but lose your soul?*”¹⁰ We would do well to remember native Nebraskan Willa Cather’s line in her novel *My Antonia* where she defines happiness as “being dissolved into something complete and great.” “To be *dissolved* NOT to be affirmed, but *dissolved*.”¹¹ Each of us needs to ask: “What is my ultimate loyalty, to whom or to what shall I be committed? To whom or to what shall I give my all?”

This is why Joshua recalls Israel’s history. He knows “God does not say, ‘Trust me and I will do great things for you.’ God says, ‘I have done great things for you: trust me.’”¹² This is the foundation of evangelism: God in Jesus Christ; not the American dream, not the pursuit of happiness, not the good life; but God, God’s commandments, and God’s faithfulness to us in any and all circumstances beckoning us to live for the gospel!

One of the greatest saints and contemporary evangelists of the last century, Billy Graham, tells this wonderful story: “Nearly 200 years ago

there were 2 Scottish brothers named John and David Livingstone. John had set his mind on making money and becoming wealthy, and he did. But under his name in an old edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* John Livingstone is listed simply as “the brother of David Livingstone.”

And who was David Livingstone? While John had dedicated himself to making money, David had knelt and prayed. Surrendering himself to Christ, he resolved, “I will place no value on anything I have or possess unless it is in relationship to the Kingdom of God.” The inscription over his burial place in Westminster Abbey reads, “For 30 years his life was spent in an unwearied effort to evangelize.” This was a man who lived what he believed and took the gospel to Africa where today Christianity is growing like a wildfire.

On his 59th birthday David Livingstone wrote, “My Jesus, my King, my Life, my All; I again dedicate my whole self to Thee.”¹³

¹M.L. King, Jr. *Speech in Detroit, June 23, 1963*

²Fred Craddock, *Reflections on My Call to Preach*, StL: Chalice Press, 2009.

³Donald Miller, *Blue Like Jazz*, Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2003., pp. 111-112.

⁴Romans 10:14

⁵Attribution unknown

⁶Deuteronomy 4:7

⁷Matthew 22:37-38

⁸Micah 6:8

⁹Joseph R. Sizoo, “Exposition: The Book of Joshua,” *Interpreter’s Bible, Vol. II*, Nashville: Abingdon, 1953, p. 669.

¹⁰Luke 9:25

¹¹From Peter Gomes sermon, “Freedom, Choice and Commitment,” *Strength for the Journey*, SF: Harper, 2003, p. 28.

¹²Ibid., p. 27.

¹³Billy Graham in “Breakfast with Billy Graham,” *Christianity Today, Vol. 41, no. 6*, as found in *PreachingToday.com*, Keyword: “Joshua 24.”