

Acts of Courage

Daniel 6:10-23; Psalm 143:10-12; Acts 4:1-4, 15-20

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Acts of courage come in many forms. We routinely see the media reports of

- the person being rescued from an accident just before the car bursts into flame,
- the person being rescued from a fatal fall by someone who is risking their own life to make the rescue,
- the student standing up to the school-yard bully.

The people that we will follow in today's stories knew the danger that they faced to their very lives and, even in the possibility of losing their lives, acted with tremendous courage.

First, a brief history of Daniel: Daniel was a Hebrew from Judah. Sometime between 609 and 598 BC Judah had been conquered by Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon. Daniel became one of the captives who were taken into Babylon. He drew the attention of the king because he was wiser and stronger than many of the Babylonian wise men. With God's help, Daniel was able to interpret the dreams of the king when Wise Men of his court could not.

After Nebuchadnezzar died, Daniel was elevated in the court of the king's son, Nebuchadnezzar II. Following that king, Daniel was elevated in the court of Belshazzar, and following his death, Daniel served in the Court of King Darius, now king of the Medes and the Persians who had conquered Babylon. Because of Daniel's faithfulness to God and because God continued to guide his life, Daniel eventually became third in the government.

Daniel's devotion to his God, Yahweh, and his favor with the king incited to jealousy the others in the king's court, and so they set about a plan to do away with Daniel for good. They urged King Darius to write a law that was irrevocable that for the next 30 days, no god was to be worshiped except him, and anyone who did not follow the law would be put to death. Foolishly, the king did so.

Knowing this, Daniel continued to bow at his eastern window in his home, facing toward Jerusalem, and pray three times a day as his Jewish religion required. This was the opportunity that the men of the king's court needed to bring a charge against Daniel. The king's law could not be reversed. In spite of the king's great sadness, Daniel was thrown into the den of the lions and the stone rolled over the opening. Sleep evaded King Darius that night and early in the morning he ordered that the stone be rolled away. Before him stood Daniel, unharmed, among the lions.

The courage of Daniel changed a king, who changed a nation. Remember, the law of the Medes and the Persians could not be changed? This is the law that King Darius wrote: "Men of the kingdom are to fear and tremble before the God of Daniel, for He is the living God, and enduring forever. And his kingdom is one that will not be destroyed, and his dominion will be forever. He delivers and rescues and performs signs and wonders, in heaven and on earth, Who has also delivered Daniel from the power of the lions."

So Daniel enjoyed success in the reign of Darius and in the reign of Cyrus the Persian.

The two other men in our story that was read this morning are Peter and John, men who had walked with, and ministered with, and been taught by Jesus for three years. They are among his strongest disciples.

They remained in Jerusalem immediately after the resurrection, healing people of their physical illnesses and preaching about the resurrected Jesus. The healing was one thing, but the preaching of a resurrected Jesus was more than the rulers of the Temple could bear. The rulers of the Temple were the Sadducees, and the Sadducees did not believe in life after death.

All of the disciples had been fearful that they would experience the same fate as Jesus, a death by crucifixion. Immediately after his death they had literally locked themselves inside a room in hiding.

Pentecost and the coming of the Holy Spirit had changed the disciples. The story of Peter and John demonstrates the courage that they possessed. No matter that they might be jailed by the religious authorities; no matter that they might suffer the physical harm that jailing often brought; no matter that they might lose their lives for telling the people about Jesus; they could do no other. When ordered by the authorities to cease their preaching and teaching, they respond, "Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you religious leaders be the judge, for we cannot stop speaking what we have seen and heard."

The world was changed because of those few men and women who had the courage to follow their Lord rather than respond to the threats of people.

Courage was a decision by those who have lived in this modern age and those who were the leaders in the Civil Rights Movement with the goal of bringing about equal rights for the African Americans of this country.

Perhaps one of the best-known decisions of the U.S. Supreme Court was the *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*, on May 17, 1954.

The 13th amendment ended slavery on January 31, 1865. The 14th amendment, added on July 9, 1868, was meant to establish equal rights to all citizens of the United States. The 14th amendment was amended on February 26, 1870 to give Black men the right to vote. So why, might we ask, was there segregation in the schools if the 14th amendment gave equal rights to all citizens?

A strange, seemingly unconnected Supreme Court decision in 1896 set the precedent. In 1890, the state of Louisiana passed The Separate Car Act declaring that all rail companies carrying passengers in Louisiana must provide separate but equal accommodations for White and non-White passengers. The penalty for riding in the wrong car was a fine of \$25 or 20 days in jail. *Separate* but *equal* were the key words.

The Black community enlisted Homer Plessy, who they determined to be one-eighth Black and seven-eighths White. He bought a first-class ticket to ride in the Whites-only car. Plessy was arrested. His representation in court argued that the law violated the 13th and 14th amendments. Eventually the decision by the U.S. Supreme Court was that "The 14th amendment could not have been intended to abolish distinctions based upon color, or to enforce social as distinguished from political equality or a commingling of the two races upon terms unsatisfying to either."

Thereafter, separate but equal became the law of the land in public accommodations, restaurants, drinking fountains, restrooms, and schools. Of course, separate is never equal.

Enter Thurgood Marshall, an attorney with the NAACP. Marshall had grown up in Baltimore. His mother was a school teacher and his father was a steward at a ritzy club. On his days off, Marshall's father would occasionally take the boys to court so that they could watch the legal process. Following their experience, he would debate the proceedings with the boys, constantly encouraging the boys to prove their observations.

Marshall was forced to attend all-Black schools. Being a mischievous child, he was often sent out of class to read the Constitution as a punishment. By the time he graduated from high school he knew the Constitution backwards and forwards.

He graduated from an all-Black college and aspired to attend law school. He was denied entrance to the University of Maryland because of the color of his skin. He and his wife and his parents moved near Howard University and his mother sold her wedding ring so that he would have the tuition for law school. Marshall graduated valedictorian of his class in 1933 and moved back to Baltimore to begin his law practice. He accepted clients who could not pay but who had been denied their civil rights. As he became known for his successful representation, labor organizations and other big clients came to him.

He became an attorney for the NAACP and successfully argued that the University of Maryland Law School should allow African-American admissions. Marshall traveled to dangerous places in the South to investigate lynchings, the denial of voting rights, jury service, and fair trials. At one point he was overseeing 430 separate cases.

Marshall then began to plan with a team of attorneys to present a case to overturn the separate but equal doctrine. After Truman rejected the separate but equal doctrine in relation to the G.I. Bill, Marshall was ready to argue the education case before the Court.

On May 17, 1954, the U.S. Supreme Court voted unanimously that segregation in public education was unconstitutional. The real test would come when the Black students known as the Little Rock Nine integrated the high school with the assistance of the National Guard in the face of the opposition of Governor Orval Faubus. They suffered obscenities, physical abuse, and pressure to withdraw. In the end they became the heroes who made it possible for others to do likewise all across the nation.

Thurgood Marshall was appointed by President Lyndon Johnson to become the first African American to serve on the U.S. Supreme Court. He was confirmed as an Associate Justice on June 13, 1967. He served there for 24 years until his retirement.

Courage is not the absence of fear; it is the ability to do the right thing in the face of fear. It is the ability to do the right thing because it is the right thing to do. May God give us the courage to build bridges instead of walls so that indeed, one day, we may realize the Beloved Community.
Amen.