

Sermon: Courage, Dear Heart
Written by: Rev. Jessica M. Ashcroft-Townsley
Scripture: Haggai 1:15b-2:9

From time to time, I begin a sermon with a confession. This morning is another one of those moments. I must confess that I am uncomfortable with patriotic holidays in the church. As a Christian who takes very seriously our call to be people of peace and who hears Christ's very clear acknowledgement of the blessedness of peacemakers, talk of war brings up a certain tension in me. I want to be clear that this is not born of animosity toward our country or any other: like any honest person, I understand the debt owed to those who have fought so valiantly and sacrificially for the life we enjoy. As a result of that, Veteran's and Memorial Day are the "patriotic" holidays I feel an affinity for. We ought to express our gratitude for those who have given so much and asked so little.

The problem for me, as a faith leader, is that we have a fine line to walk between acknowledgement and gratitude on the one hand and nationalism or idolatry on the other. We do not worship country and God. We worship only God. Too many churches allow holidays like this one to become a worship service that celebrates America and, while I fully understand loyalty to country and think celebrating our country is fine, *this specific time* is God's time. I feel strongly that we allow so little room for God in our daily lives, that, at a minimum, this single hour each week can be set aside for God and God alone. All this to say, please understand that I approach this day very cautiously from a theological standpoint. If it seems like I'm not celebrating America in this worship service, that's purposeful, but not disrespectful. I'm an American, but I'm a Christian minister first.

Having said that, as we reflect on gratitude this month, it's fitting that we do say a word of thanks to our veterans because, in a world without universal religious freedom, we know that it is in part thanks to our veterans that we enjoy the ability to practice our religion as we see fit. Many have fought and died protecting a kind of life that allows space for more than one viewpoint. As a UCC minister and an interested observer of English history, I know how dangerous limits on religious freedom can be and the lengths some have gone to in order to practice their faith in peace. Inquisitions, burnings at the stake, and all manner of torture has been used to bend people to one vision of

the Holy One. The Separatists we would come to call the “Pilgrims,” bravely boarded the Mayflower to set sail from the shores of Plymouth, England all those years ago and as they did that, their eyes were fixed on a particular image of God that did not conform to the state church’s image.

These are pertinent facts for us to understand as UCC members. The Pilgrims would later become part of the Congregationalists, one of the streams from which the UCC was formed. We are united because many streams of religious thought continued to try to come together in the way Jesus dreamed we could.

But as I was preparing my sermon for this week and studying the scriptures, it was the work of another famous religious Brit, C.S. Lewis, that came to mind. Lewis was a lay member of the very church the Pilgrims had separated from a few centuries prior to his birth. Lewis is famous for his depth of theological knowledge imparted in his Christian writings as well as for his fiction series *The Chronicles of Narnia*, a film adaptation from which our sermon slide takes its image today. As I thought about both Veteran’s Sunday and the scriptures from the prophet Haggai, the theme of courage kept returning to me. The stories of C.S. Lewis capture characters of immense courage and sacrifice, those willing to fight for what is good and right against all that is evil in their world.

As I rewatched the film, I was reminded of *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* and its main characters Lucy, Peter, Susan, and Edmund. I looked forward to seeing Aslan again, the lion who C.S. Lewis designed to fit the qualities of God we see through God’s incarnation in Jesus. In *Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, Lucy and Edmund (along with their obnoxious cousin, Edmund) are transported back to Narnia through a magical painting. They land in the ocean and are picked up by Prince Caspian and taken aboard the Dawn Treader ship. Caspian is on a mission to find the seven lost lords of Narnia, friends of his father’s who have been driven into exile. Through a series of adventures and misadventures, the travelers aboard the Dawn Treader set out to find the seven and stop the strange, evil green mist threatening Narnia.

The tale is exciting with many twists and turns, but we don’t have time to explore it in its entirety. One of the things that has always struck me about this film is the character of

Lucy. Lucy is known as Queen Lucy the Valiant, and valiant she is. The trouble with the film adaptation of this brilliant book, is that it loses too much of the Christian imagery. So, as I watched it, I realized that my favorite scene with Lucy was missing and, of course, that's the very scene I wanted to mention today. In the course of their mission aboard the Dawn Treader, they travel through a mist that grows into a all-encompassing darkness hovering over expanse of the deep. Soon after, they encounter a man in the water who tells them that there is an island full of the stuff of dreams and nightmares in the midst of the darkness and that, should they run aground there, they would never escape.

Lucy, valiant though she may be, is overcome by a hefty dose of fear as she stands at the ready with a bow in her hand. She whispers in that moment to Aslan, who is not with them in this mist, begging for him to come to their rescue. Suddenly, through the mist, a beam of light appears small at first, but growing brighter by the second. A bird swiftly appears in the beam, an albatross, who whispers to Lucy, "Courage, dear heart." Lucy recognizes in that moment that this is the voice of Aslan, and she breathes a sigh of relief, because that beam will now lead them out of the darkness and into the light.

In remembering this scene, I couldn't help but draw the parallel between Aslan's voice and the voice of the Lord as told through the prophet Haggai in today's lectionary reading, "Yet now, take courage, says the Lord... take courage... all you people of the land... for I am with you... My spirit abides among you; do not fear."

God's message here is that they can go forward bravely because they are not alone. The words of the Lord, "My spirit abides among you; do not fear," will remind us of the words found in Isaiah 41:10 "Do not fear, for I am with you." They might remind us also of Jesus's words to the disciples in Matthew 14:27, "Take courage, it is I. Do not be afraid." They might remind us of any of the other hundreds of instances we are given in scripture when God explicitly tells God's people not to be afraid, because God is near. In our darkest moments, when all the world seems to be crumbling around us and the ground beneath us begins to shake, it is in God whom we can trust. God who remains with us amidst the worst this world has to offer. God who does not abandon us no matter how rocky the road gets.

Our challenge in those moments, though, is to remain faithful. Like those who left the shores of England in search of something better, we must trust that God is with us as we seek to more closely follow where God leads. Along with all our freedoms, we do have a choice: we can follow in the way of Jesus or we can follow our own way. Looking at the world today, I think we can clearly see that with rank injustice and widespread apathy toward what matters, things don't go well. That's what the prophet Haggai is trying to tell the people of Israel here as they try to rebuild the new Jerusalem and the temple. When we are concerned with money before people, we are not following the way of Jesus. When we cheer on billionaires who buy up whatever they want to spread misinformation and cruelty in the name of "Freedom," we are not following the way of Jesus. When we spend more time fighting to exclude those we don't like instead of feeding the hungry, we aren't following the way of Jesus. When we care more about shouting loud campaign slogans than helping the sick, we aren't following the way of Jesus. When we fight harder against wearing a mask than we do against racism, we aren't following the way of Jesus.

We have a choice, friends, and as followers of the way of Jesus, as faithful and beloved children of God, as those who believe in the promise of the kingdom of God, we know what that is. Just as Lucy did as she traveled across the murky face of the deep, we must have the courage to make the choice loving choice to follow the voice of God. It's a hard choice to make in a world that tells us to do the exact opposite, but that can't stop us from making it. Jesus did not tell us that following him would be easy—in fact, he told us the very opposite. Discipleship requires fierce bravery and persistence. It takes courage to stand against the wave of popular worldly opinion that tells us to gather more things and help fewer people. It takes courage to give sacrificially to the things that matter instead of storing up stockpiles of treasure we tell ourselves is for a rainy day. It takes courage to trust in God in the face of a world that is on fire. It's a challenge to have and act with such courage, but it is one to which we, as followers of Jesus Christ, must rise.

So I say to you on this day in which we honor so many who so courageously gave so much, have “courage, dear hearts.” God has not abandoned us, but neither can we abandon God’s call. Amen.