

Tall Order

I want to thank Mark for the opportunity to bring today's message. It's been nearly a year since Marjie or I have been blessed to bring God's word to you. As part of my advancing to Certified Lay Speaker, I will be taking an advanced class at the end of July entitled, "Lay Speaker's Preach". Mark will be teaching that class. I'm certain that this sermon will be used as an example of how not to write and preach a sermon.

Also, after hearing many great sermons at Annual Conference, I know this one will never fall into the same category.

This morning I want to talk about God's power and grace and how it is at work in our lives. We can call upon God to accomplish the tasks He has set before us, even when in our human understanding they seem impossible.

One such man, Sidwell Mogothu must have thought so. Born in South Africa at the height of Apartheid, being black, he started out with many strikes against him. This was the time when blacks and "colored" people felt the full power of the Apartheid system. Laws had been enacted which required all persons to carry a "pass" and be prepared to produce it at any time.

One such consequence of the pass laws, were that people were categorized into various racial categories and then forcibly relocated wherever the government wished. For example, Blacks living near Johannesburg were forced to move to SOWETO, effectively a ghetto.

Sidwell did want many blacks did then. He joined the African National Congress (ANC). This very act could result in imprisonment, because the government had declared the ANC a terrorist organization. In fact Sidwell did end up in jail.

First he was imprisoned in Johannesburg, then later on moved to the infamous Robbin Island. Robbin island is located off the coast of Capetown in a situation similar to Alcatraz. But the conditions were far worse than Alcatraz. They were forced to work a lime quarry, which eventually led to health problems for many. Food and sanitation were poor as well.

Sidwell must have thought that there was no way that he would ever get out alive. Then he met Nelson Mandela and things changed forever. From then on, he took life's lemons and learned to make lemonade.

During the reign of Saul, Israel faced a similar situation. They were surrounded by many nations who resented the fact that Israel had forced them off their land. One of these nations, the Philistines, had even captured the ark for a time. Following a string of successful battles, things suddenly began to go wrong for Israel. Most of them could be laid at the feet of King Saul. Because he began to feel invincible even to the point of deliberate disobedience to God.

Saul, you may recall, had been anointed by Samuel to be Israel's first king. At the beginning he was faithful in doing God's will, but eventually turned away from God.

Because of Saul's hubris, he let the army fall into a sorry state. Because Saul was not provisioning the troops, it was up to soldier's family members to bring food. There were many desertions and military discipline was nearly non-existent. It didn't take long for the Philistines to get wind of this and move in to take advantage of the situation. It was because everyone knew that the army of Israel would lose a battle fought against the Philistines, that they offered a sure-fire alternative in the form of Goliath.

The army of Israel was utterly terrified as every day Goliath repeated the challenge. Even Saul, who had been so full of hubris, was now totally at a loss about what to do.

But had Saul turned to God, he would have discovered that the situation was not as hopeless as they all believed. For God intended to press forward. First, challenging Saul (and us) to move out of the comfortable situation into faith. Secondly, God equips us for the tasks that he calls us to. And finally, he gives us grace to buoy us up when the situation seems the most hopeless.

The first part of God's plan is to move us out of our comfort zone. God has been moving me out of my comfort zone for some time now. For most of my life I have been aware that I was different than others. I had problems making friends. Often times understanding social situations was impossible for me. To avoid embarrassment I usually avoided social situations entirely. The main reason I didn't get married until I was 42 was because dating was incomprehensible to me. And public speaking—I might as well win the lottery. It wasn't going to happen.

But then God began to work on me. Through the internet I discovered information about Asperger's Syndrome, a mild form of autism. There was a developmental neurologist at UCLA that offered treatment so I made an appointment to see him.

The doctor put me on medication which had shown promise in reducing the anxiety associated with social situations. He also suggested I investigate several support groups for Asperger sufferers. I quickly discovered that even though suffering from Aspergers, it was mild compared to others in the support group.

Not long afterwards, step two of God's plan went into action. I soon was facing the very real possibility of lay-off from my job. This was not uncommon, as I had been laid off three times before. This time, however, there was no other job to transfer to. So I put my resume out on the internet.

God must have been waiting for that, because within a month I had an interview and then a job offer from Raytheon. This time God intended that I move from my physical comfort zone, to Tucson.

This was followed quickly by step 3. Because I had been attending the church I grew up in, I had been able to avoid most socially difficult situations. Mainly, that meant just singing in the choir and attending on Sunday mornings.

But now, I found a church home that was truly inviting and soon found myself more and more involved with church activities. This then led to step 4.

Through the internet, once again, God was at work. He led Marjie to my website, and the rest, they say, is history. Now God had provided me someone to really help me move out of my comfort zone. On to step 5.

There was an announcement of an informational meeting about the Walk to Emmaus. God was there prodding again, because I felt moved to attend. The next thing you know I'm going on the walk.

Now God really was off to the races. Because I kept being shoved out of the comfort on a regular basis. I found myself helping out with a Sunday evening worship service at St Mark's. The impetus had been our Disciple class. I soon found out that "helping" meant bringing the message. And so, now, I find that public speaking is now part of my comfort zone. After many, many nudges I've learned to expect to be challenged by God. One of those nudges led me here

Back to the army of Israel. They were experiencing the mother of all challenges from God. This one came in the form of Goliath. No one, not even Saul, was ready to take on that challenge. That is, before David showed up.

David, too, was acquainted with how God works. For God had been moving him out of comfort zones all along his short lifespan. Not the least being his secret anointing by Samuel to be Saul's successor.

So when David heard for himself, Goliath's challenge, there was no question for him what needed to be done. Because there was no one else.

Whether Saul had been given a similar challenge by God is not known. Most likely it did not fit with the lifestyle that Saul had set up for himself. Saul could, and did, get used to the King business in short order. He completely turned his back on God and Samuel, forgetting how he got to be king in the first place.

Then we read in Mark about a similar situation that takes place in a boat in the middle of the Sea of Galilee. Even though 4 of the disciples were fishermen, they apparently had never experienced this magnitude of storm. They quickly found themselves out of their comfort zone.

Not only them, but the number of smaller boats of hangers-on that were attempting to follow Jesus across the lake. As the storm bore down, they surely faced a test of their commitment to Jesus. How many were still there when Jesus calmed the storm and completed his journey to the far shore?

What about us? What are the comfort zones we have built up for ourselves? In starting a new fellowship that God desires to grow into a part of His church, there are many opportunities where God is calling us to move out of our comfort zone.

Think back to the nudges you may have received from God. Were we like Saul, wanting to maintain our life of ease? Surely God doesn't mean for us to be committed to His work on other days besides Sunday? Surely we can let others serve on committees? Surely God is not calling US?

Even though God calls us out of our comfort zone, it does not mean we are left to our own devices. God equips us to do the tasks to which we are called..

One day a farmer's donkey fell down into a well. The animal cried piteously for hours as the farmer tried to figure out what to do. Finally he decided the animal was old and the well needed to be covered up anyway, it just wasn't worth it to retrieve the donkey. So he invited all his neighbors to come over and help him. They all grabbed a shovel and began to shovel dirt into the well. At first the donkey realized what was happening and cried horribly. Then, to everyone's amazement, he quieted down. A few shovel loads later, the farmer finally looked down the well and was astonished at what he saw. With every shovel of dirt that hit his back, the donkey was doing something amazing. He would shake it off and take a step up. As the farmer's neighbors continued to shovel dirt on top of the animal, he would shake it off and take a step up. Pretty soon everyone was amazed as the donkey stepped up over the edge of the well and trotted off!

The farmer had thought he was taking care of the situation one way, but in reality had equipped the donkey with the means of rescue. How often do we think we know the answer to our problems but only later come to find out we had it all wrong?

When David presented himself to Saul as the one to take on Goliath, Saul lent him some armor that he thought would protect David. That must have been a ridiculous sight, the small stature of David weighed down with all that heavy armor. Clearly, this was not going to be the solution.

But God had equipped David with a far better solution than the one proposed by Saul. In the past, David had been able to subdue lions and bears that had attacked the flocks, with just his slingshot.

The bible says that David selected five smooth stones, not the heavy armor of Saul. It took just five smooth stones to fell the man who had terrorized a whole army. And because God had selected and equipped David for the task, the outcome was never really in doubt.

Sometimes all we need is faith in God to succeed. After Jesus finished teaching for the day, he told his disciples that he wished to escape the crowds and cross over to the far shore. The bible said that they (the disciples) took him just as he was. That is, they didn't bother to stop and load up on provisions for the trip. When the storm blew up, all they had was their faith in Jesus to calm the storm.

Society tells us that we must "be prepared" for any unforeseen eventuality. But God tells us, that the best laid plans of man are fallible and only through faith in him, trusting in the equipment that he alone provides can we endure life's storms. This is not to say, that we

shouldn't be prudent and take necessary precautions for life's small matters. But when it comes to the life and death, "my world is crumbling before me" matters, the only solution is in the equipment that God provides.

What is the equipment that God has given us? The answer comes through relationship with him. Through prayer, where we listen to what he has to say to us. We can't know the solution if we aren't listening to him.

God also provides answers through scripture. We can encounter all of life's situations in the pages of the bible. We like to think that we're the first to have to deal with our tough situations. But this is not so. Through disciplined bible study we can come to know how God has already solved our problem.

The regular attendance of worship is where we can get back in right relationship with God. Through corporate prayer, praise, thanksgiving and the hearing of God's holy word we can get our attitudes readjusted, to get back on the right path. God has provided a means of grace in communion which will help us restore the relationship with Him.

We need time with other Christians as well. Be it time spent in bible study classes, adult Sunday school or accountability groups, we can share our joys and disappointments with each other. Because God has not provided each of us with all of the spiritual gifts, we can get the benefit of the gifts he has provided to others.

Finally we need to spend time in devotion. Reading the inspired words of others is such a help. Knowing that there are people today going through what we are facing and that God has equipped them is of vast importance. I find reading the Upper Room each day at breakfast starts my day off.

Even for all the ways that God equips us to deal with life's storms, He also knows this is not enough. Because He knows that we are apt to get discouraged when the work seems the hardest, he has also provided us with grace, bountifully and freely given.

Watching a trapeze show is breathtaking. We wonder at the dexterity and timing. We gasp at near-misses. In most cases, there is a net underneath. When they fall, they jump up and bounce back to the trapeze. In Christ, we live on the trapeze. The whole world should be able to watch and say, "Look at how they live, how they love one another. Look at how well the husbands treat their wives. And aren't they the best workers in the factories and offices, the best neighbors, the best students?" That is to live on the trapeze, being a show to the world. What happens when we slip? The net is surely there. The blood of our Lord, Jesus Christ, has provided forgiveness for ALL our trespasses. Both the net and the ability to stay on the trapeze are works of God's grace. Of course we can't be continually sleeping on the net. If that is the case, I doubt whether that person is a trapeze artist.

In the boat during the height of the storm, God's grace was there. Jesus slept calmly, knowing that his Father had the situation in hand. When awakened by the disciples, a few simple words, "Peace! Be still", is all it took to quiet the storm.

We can call on Jesus to calm our storms, knowing with assurance that he will provide the grace to help us through them.

In the midst of our struggles today, where do we see God's grace? How many times have you felt the satisfaction of a job well done? That's God's grace. How many times when the situation seems hopeless, there appears someone to help you through it? That's God's grace in action.

Teachers see God's grace when their students' faces light up with the "aha" moment. The point where the concept has been grasped.

The times where I have helped the "least of these", whether serving dinner at Primavera or tutoring children at Nash Elementary school, I have seen the face of Jesus. When we see Jesus' face, we receive God's grace. Where have you seen the face of Jesus?

What have we learned? We know that God is always seeking to call us out of our comfort zones to serve him. But that he will equip us to perform the tasks he has called us to. And we know that God will not leave us to fend for ourselves, but will provide His grace to sustain us.

What about Sidwell? He stepped out of his comfort zone to serve God. He was equipped by God for the tasks that God called him to do. Nelson Mandela and others had set up an "academy" at the lime quarry, away from the guards where they could teach each other. Through the academy, Sidwell finished high school and began to take college classes.

Sidwell had to only spend a few years at Robbin Island compared to Nelson Mandela, but they were years well spent. For when the apartheid regime unraveled and Robin Island liberated, he was able to continue on with his education, attending seminary and becoming a Methodist pastor. Later he was minister of education in the Mbecki government.

Marjie and I had the privilege of meeting him when we were in South Africa 2 years ago. We asked him if, through all the years of imprisonment, torture and late night raids, he had any ill feelings for the old apartheid regime. He did not. Instead we saw the face of Jesus. He had received God's grace and was now spreading it to others.

God gives us a pretty tall order. But when we undertake them we are equipped and provided grace by God. What are some of the tall orders in your life?

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Services are at 9:30