

Title: Adventurous Faith Responds

Text: 1 Kings 19:19-21

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Six years ago we sought after God for his vision for Newlife. A vision emerged that is encapsulated by the phrase, 'Changing Lives, Transforming the world.' We believe that with the gospel of Jesus Christ and by the power of His Spirit is transforming our world one changed life at a time, and that we His church, have the privilege of participating in that transformation.

Undergirding this vision are eight core values of our church. These are statements that describe the type of church we believe we are, and that God is calling us to be. They are descriptive, as well as aspirational statements. These values include things like Scriptural Discernment, Empowering Leadership, and Fervent Prayer.

One of those eight core values is Adventurous Faith. What is meant to be a church marked by adventurous faith? This is what we have said:

Acting out of the conviction that faith is an unfolding adventure that God call us into, we will allow risk and utter dependency upon God to mark our journey.

Each of the eight core values of Newlife are undergirded by a scriptural foundation, and adventurous faith is no exception. Hebrews, chapters 11 and 12 is the key text that supports this value, most particularly, Hebrews 11:1-2:

Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see. ²This is what the ancients were commended for.
(Hebrews 11:1-2)

For the rest of Hebrews 11 the writer gives us the Faith Hall of Fame; the men and women who, most often facing great odds and opposition, achieved great things in and for God. Men and women like Abraham and Moses and Joshua and Rahab.

The Hebrews faith Hall of Fame directly confronts one of the most dangerous misconceptions about what faith is. The misconception is this; faith is synonymous, or is the same as belief. The dangerous delusion is that Christian faith is all about having the right beliefs about God and Jesus and the Holy Spirit. This is a half truth.

Half truths are the most dangerous lies.

The Apostle James confronts this half-truth – that faith is synonymous with belief - in devastating fashion:

You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that —and shudder.
(James 2:19)

Do not get me wrong; what we believe matters. What we believe about the identity and work of Jesus in particular is of critical importance. Faith starts with right belief, but it does not end there. Faith is belief in action. Faith is acting in a way consistent or congruent with our beliefs. I have a simple four word definition of faith that I hope all of us will memorize over the next month:

Faith is belief enacted.

At its core, faith is a verb, not a noun. It is active, not static.

Going back to the Hebrews 11 Hall of Fame, Abraham and Moses and Joshua and Rahab and all the others believed in God, but what marked them out was the way they acted that belief in radical, breathtaking and audacious ways. The writer of Hebrews confronts us with their testimony:

Without faith it is impossible to please God.
(Hebrews 11:6)

Without faith, without belief enacted in radical, self-giving and trusting obedience it is impossible for us to please God. God is looking for men and women and a church that seeks to do no less than please Him with Hebrews 11 faith – belief enacted.

Over the next month we are going to spend some time with some Hebrews 11 Hall of Famers. We are going to examine their lives to see what Adventurous Faith looks like – belief enacted in and for God.

In the Hebrews 11 Faith Hall of Fame, the writer includes prophets as examples of faith for us – prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah and Ezekiel and Amos and Micah. One of Israel's most revered prophets was a man called Elisha. We are going to get to know Elisha's story a little bit over the next few weeks. I just want to introduce him to you this morning. Elisha lived around 90 years before Jesus, when Israel was a nation divided between a northern and southern kingdom.

Every adventure has a beginning.

For the Hobbit Frodo the adventure begins when he is given a mission to find a mysterious lost ring.

For Peter, Edmund, Lucy and Susan the adventure begins when they walk through a wardrobe into a magical land called Narnia.

Every adventure story has a beginning, and the adventure of faith is no different.

Elisha's adventure of faith began when his life was dramatically interrupted. For many years Elijah had spoken God's word fearlessly, often facing fierce opposition. In fact, Elijah was the last man standing as all the other prophets had been killed, and now King Ahab and his wife Jezebel were determined to assassinate him. Elijah became so fed up and disillusioned with the situation; he blamed God, fled to the desert and had a suicidal pity party where he was the only guest. But God wouldn't let him die. God provides Elijah with food and water and forty days later Elijah is standing on Mount Horeb and he gives God both barrels: 'I have done everything you asked of me God! I have spoken every message you have asked me! I have called people to repentance! I have done all of this, but my life is a misery! Why me God!'

God is gracious to Elijah, and speaks to him with a gentle, still, small and healing voice. Amongst other things, he tells Elijah that the burden of being Israel's prophet will not be his forever. God names Elijah's successor:

Anoint **Elisha** son of Shaphat from Abel Meholah to succeed you as prophet.
(1 Kings 19:16)

Soon after we read this:

So Elijah went from (Horeb) and found Elisha son of Shaphat. He was plowing with twelve yoke of oxen, and he himself was driving the twelfth pair. Elijah went up to him and threw his cloak around him. Elisha then left his oxen and ran after Elijah. "Let me kiss my father and mother goodbye," he said, "and then I will come with you."

"Go back," Elijah replied. "What have I done to you?"

So Elisha left him and went back. He took his yoke of oxen and slaughtered them. He burned the plowing equipment to cook the meat and gave it to the people, and they ate. Then he set out to follow Elijah and became his servant.

(1 Kings 19:19-21)

The principle that Elisha's story gives us is this. This is the main point of my message today:

Adventurous Faith responds to the call of God.

Adventurous Faith begins when God's speaks and we respond.

Adventurous faith hears and trusts and obeys the voice of God. Adventurous faith says yes to God.

Here are some principles in the call of Elisha that I think are applicable to all of us:

First, God's call interrupts our ordinary life.

Elisha was ploughing his fields when Elijah placed his mantle on him. God's call was a surprising and unexpected interruption to a normal day. That is often how it happens. God called Moses when he was tending his father-in-law's sheep, Samuel while he was sleeping and Peter and Andrew as they tended their nets.

God's call always interrupts the ordinary to achieve the extraordinary.

Second, God's call is often heard through others.

Elisha did not have a blinding vision of heaven like Isaiah, or experience a burning bush like Moses. Elijah simply, yet profoundly – placed his mantle, his cloak on him. In this action, Elijah was communicating without words that Elisha was to succeed him in his prophetic calling. The mantle of a prophet was symbolic of his authority and power. Elijah, having heard from God, was saying God has anointed you Elisha to be Israel's prophet.

I started preaching when I was eighteen years old. Looking back, my pastor at the time took an enormous risk. I was you, I was arrogant, I was lazy and I was ignorant. Not a great resume! But he asked me to preach, and I think it was after the second time he came to me and he said, 'Stuart, I think God might be calling you to be a Pastor someday.' You could have knocked me over with a feather. He wasn't saying, 'God told me!' He wasn't placing a preacher's mantle on me. But he was planting a seed in me that would sprout and grow and eventually lead me ten years later, with all my fears and doubts, to enter Bible College.

I would love for God to speak to me with blinding, unmistakable visions. Mostly he doesn't. Mostly God speaks to me through the still small voice of scripture, or the prayerful insight of a trusted mentor, or a song, or in my journaling. Some of us may be waiting for God to speak to us through a lightning bolt with a message attached and are frustrated he hasn't. Perhaps the problem is not that God isn't speaking, but that we're not listening?

Third, God's call is often dangerous.

When Elisha asks Elijah to go back to farewell his family, Elijah has one of those 'oh no!' moments. 'Oh no, what have I done to you.' In commissioning Elisha to be his successor, Elijah was leading him into a life that would often be marked by pain and grief and loss and loneliness. 'What have I done to you?!' We often romanticize faith. We have big dreams, and so we should because we have a big God. But following God's call will always be a dangerous adventure because it is a way marked by a Cross. It is on this Way that we discover the beautiful, paradoxical truth that to gain our life, first we must lose it.

Fourth, God's call demands movement.

It is a dual movement; a movement away and a movement towards.

Elijah places his mantle on Elisha and then Elisha returns home where he immediately kills his oxen, burns his farming equipment and hosts a feast for his family. What was he doing? Elisha was breaking forever with his old life. He was effectively saying from this day forward I will never farm again and I may never see my family again.

Responding to God's call, Elisha was moving away from his old life and towards or into a radically new life.

This has always how it has been, and always will be.

On Monday we were reading Mark, chapter 1 in our SOAP readings. I was again struck by the radical ways Jesus called his first disciples, and how they responded:

As Jesus walked beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. "Come, follow me," Jesus said, "and I will send you out to fish for people." At once they left their nets and followed him.
(Mark 1:16-18)

Jesus called Simon and Andrew away from their old life and into a radically new one. They moved away from casting their nets for fish towards casting their lives for men and women. In their response we see the truth that faith is not mere belief, but belief enacted.

When Jesus calls, he always calls us to leave an old life behind. Simon and Peter were called away from their nets and Elisha away from his plough. They were called to leave behind the comfort and safety and security of what they knew to embrace a faith-fuelled adventurous life with God.

Responding to the call of Jesus will always involve a leaving behind in order to embrace and move into the new.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, one of my heroes of faith, puts it succinctly:

When Christ calls a man, He bids him come and die.
(Dietrich Bonhoeffer)

In the year 1519 the Spanish conquistador Cortez landed on the Yucatan peninsula with 11 ships and just over 600 men. Their commission was to subdue and colonize the Aztec nation. When they landed great riches awaited them, but also a very uncertain future. The Aztecs would not meekly surrender. Some of Cortez's soldiers were ready to go back to Cuba from where they had sailed. Cortez knew that the whole expedition was precarious. And so he took a radical step. He ordered that the 11 ships that had carried them there be burnt on the beaches. There now was no turning back.

Cortez burned his ships. Elisha burned his plough and killed his oxen. And God calls us to make a radical break with, and departure from our past if we are to embrace adventurous faith with him.

So here is my question, as you hear His call:

What is God calling you away from?

I don't know what that is for you specifically, but I know what it is for all of us generally.

God is calling us away from an idolatrous fixation with safety and security. Too many of us define success as safely navigating life with a minimum of pain and distress.

We seek to avoid pain and crave safety at all costs.

We hanker for the world we know, missing out altogether on the world that God promises.

Let me illustrate.

For eighteen years, this man, a man called Merhan Karimi Nasserli was a man without a country. For eighteen years he lived in Terminal One of Charles De Gaulle airport in Paris.

Nasseri was an Iranian refugee. He arrived in Paris in 1988 after eleven years bouncing around Europe with no passport. He had no citizenship. He had no papers that enabled him to leave the airport or fly to another country. He had been expelled from his native country of Iran.

Airport authorities allowed him to live in Terminal 1, and there he stayed for eleven years, writing in a diary, living off of handouts from airport employees, showering in the airport bathroom. He could never step outside for fear of being arrested and so he would stand near the automatic doors to experience, momentarily at least, fresh air on his face. Then in September 1999 the situation reversed. French authorities presented Nasseri with an international travel card and a French residency permit. Suddenly he was free to go anywhere he wanted. But when airport officials handed him his walking papers, to everyone's surprise, he simply smiled, tucked the documents in his folder, and resumed writing in his diary. They found he was afraid to leave the bench and table that had been his home for eleven years. As the days passed and Nasseri refused to leave, airport officials said they would not throw him out of the airport, but they would have to gently and patiently coax him to find a new home.

He could leave the airport for the freedom his new papers provided. But he didn't. The safety and security of Terminal One was what he knew and he was too afraid to leave.

Eventually Nasseri's stay at the airport ended in July 2006 when he was hospitalized and his sitting place dismantled. As of 2008 he was living in a Paris homeless shelter.

Can you imagine a more unnatural home than an airport? More than an hour in an airport drives me nuts! It is bustling, it is interesting, but it is not home – it's not where we are meant to live.

When we hear God's call, when we here Jesus invitation to come and follow, we have a move to make that can be as frightening as the move Nasseri had to, but couldn't make from the airport. We are beckoned from the illusion of safety and security in the world we make for ourselves into the most safe and secure place there will ever be; the will of God for our lives. It is in the centre of God's will for us that we are only ever truly safe.

Just before Nasseri received his documentation that enabled him to leave the airport, he said this:

When I think about the past 10 years, I realize that it is all wasted time...It's not normal to stay in an airport this long. It's boring.

The tragedy was that when he could move, Nasseri didn't.

And the same tragedy is being experience by too many of us.

When Jesus died on the Cross for us, he made it possible for us to receive new citizenship papers, a new passport if you like. Those papers make it possible for us to step out in a journey of adventurous faith with God. Those papers are stamped with all sorts of possibilities, because for the one who has issued them, all things are possible!

God offers us new citizenship; he does not force it on us. Citizenship in God's kingdom is a gift to be received. But with that gift comes a call – a call to come and follow Jesus where he leads us.

Nowhere does Jesus call us to stay and believe; he calls us to come and follow.

Too many of are trapped in our own spiritual Terminal One – a sad approximation of the life in all its abundance that Jesus makes possible for us.

Abundant life is not found simply in what we believe. It is found in testing that belief with our actions – by moving out through the automatic doors of our Terminal One and into the wide and wonderful and adventurous world that God beckons us into.

We must leave behind the old – the comfortable and the safe and secure – in order to embrace the new.

Adventurous Faith is belief enacted.

Adventurous Faith begins as we respond to the call of God.

Every preacher has a few signature stories, a few sermon illustrations they would love to tell every week if they could. One of mine is a story I read buried deep in a book from my Bible College days. It is a story first told by the great Danish philosopher and Christian, Soren Kierkegaard. It is a parable of sorts:

A certain flock of geese lived together in a barnyard with high walls around it. Because the corn was good and the barnyard was secure, these geese would never take a risk. One day a philosopher goose came among them. He was a very good philosopher and every week they listened quietly and attentively to his learned discourses. 'My fellow travellers on the way of life,' he would say, 'can you seriously imagine that this barnyard, with great high walls around it, is all there is to existence?

'I tell you, there is another and a greater world outside, a world of which we are only dimly aware. Our forefathers knew of this outside world. For did they not stretch their wings and fly across the trackless wastes of desert and ocean, of green valley and wooded hill? But alas, here we remain in this barnyard, our wings folded and tucked into our sides, as we are content to puddle in the mud, never lifting our eyes to the heavens which should be our home.

The geese thought this was very fine lecturing. 'How poetical,' they thought. 'How profoundly existential. What a flawless summary of the mystery of existence.' Often the philosopher spoke of the advantages of flight, calling on the geese to be what they were. After all, they had wings, he pointed out. What were wings for, but to fly with? Often he reflected on the beauty and the wonder of life outside the barnyard, and the freedom of the skies.

And every week the geese were uplifted, inspired, moved by the philosopher's message. They hung on his every word. They devoted hours, weeks, months to a thoroughgoing analysis and critical evaluation of his doctrines. They produced learned treatises on the ethical and spiritual implications of flight. All this they did. But one thing they never did. They did not fly! For the corn was good, and the barnyard was secure!