



Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church

Asheville, North Carolina

May 10th, 2020

Sermon: "Fearless Faith"

Youth Sunday

Preachers: Frank Callison, Lindsay Hamel & Maggie Kinton

Exodus 3: 1-8, 10-15

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Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. ²There the angel of the LORD appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed. ³Then Moses said, "I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up." ⁴When the LORD saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am." ⁵Then he said, "Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." ⁶He said further, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

⁷Then the LORD said, "I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, ⁸and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. ¹⁰So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt."

¹¹But Moses said to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" ¹²He said, "I will be with you; and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain." ¹³But Moses said to God, "If I come to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?" ¹⁴God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM."¹⁵ He said further, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'I AM has sent me to you.'" ¹⁵God also said to Moses, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'The LORD,¹⁶ the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you': This is my name forever, and this my title for all generations.

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Lindsay: I can't believe it, Youth Sunday is finally here! And now, it's time for us, the Seniors, to preach. I have waited so many years for this moment, but I have to say, I am glad I am not doing this alone.

Maggie: I know what you mean, this is kinda scary. That's why I am grateful we are doing this dialogue sermon as a team - you Lindsay, me, Frank... Wait, where's Frank?

Lindsay: Oh no, we said we were going to do this ALL together! No backing out now! Frank, are you there? Frank?

Frank: Lindsay? Maggie? Where are you? I can't see you! Are you there?

Lindsay: Frank, Frank, you have to back up, you are way too close to the screen!

Frank: What, what? Am I doing it right? Am I zooming? Is this correct?

Maggie: Yes, Frank we are ALL on Zoom! And this is live, buddy.

Frank: Oh, well then where is everyone? I can only see you and the other youth.

Lindsay: No, we are literally live on youtube. The whole congregation is watching. The world could be watching. We have to look professional for our first sermon.

Frank: Wait, the whole world? Why did we ever agree to this? Can we ask for an extension? I don't know if my quarantine look is ready for primetime.

Maggie: Frank? We CANNOT reschedule. It's literally happening right now. Are you really *that* afraid?

Frank: No, it's fine.... I'm good...This is just A LOT of pressure for a first sermon...

Lindsay: Just breathe. It's ok to be afraid...truth be told, we are all a little nervous too. We have never done a Youth Sunday like this before - in GCPC history. We're trailblazers!

Maggie: Lindsay's right. We're living in this unprecedented moment - and a lot has changed in just a few weeks. School. Youth Group. Work. Worship. Hanging out. Everything is different and new.

Lindsay: Yeah, we went from having Adults say that **we**, Youth use technology too much - to asking **us** for help on how to use it.

Maggie: So true. People were saying that our technology was distancing us from the world, and now it's the only thing that's bringing us all together.

Frank: You said it. But you know, although there have been a lot of good moments these past few weeks, this has also been a really scary and hard time. As Seniors, we have had to give up (or adjust) a whole lot of our milestones. Now there are tons of Virtual Proms and Graduations. Over the phone College visits. Canceled Summer plans. It hasn't been easy to stay hopeful or get excited about next steps - when the future is still filled with such uncertainty.

Maggie: Yeah, I guess that no matter our age, we Christians have all recently asked God some pretty tough questions and our faith has been challenged.

Lindsay: Yeah, I wonder in these times we are living in, how do we keep up the faith when there is still so much to fear?

Frank: You know, Moses knew a thing or two about fear AND faith. It feels like so much of his life was about overcoming fear and leaning into faith, but how did HE do it? How do WE do it - especially when fear is so powerful? Lindsay, do you have any ideas?

Lindsay: Truth be told, I live my life in fear, not really for any reason, I just hesitate before doing most things, like going into an unfamiliar place, or doing something where the outcome is uncertain.

So for me, to be entering into high school as a freshman in a place I had never been before in a state where the only people that I knew were the people I came with, meant that everything would be left up to chance. The building was large and was growing faster by the second. Looking up at the building that was now looming over me, I was scared that I would be stuck in a place for years as an outsider. I had to take a deep breath and enter, knowing that it was too late now to turn back and walk away.

I had just moved to Kalamazoo, Michigan after my dad's work transferred him. I left Asheville, the life I knew behind and was told to look at it as an exciting new adventure, one not of my own choosing. That didn't stop my mom from saying that everything was going to be fine - just because the beginning of high school is a fresh start for everybody. I still looked at myself as an outsider because I had not grown up with any of these people.

Just like my first day of high school, there are a lot of things to be afraid of in our world, especially right now, as we see everything we know changing around us without our permission. But there is really no simple answer to the question of "what are we MOST afraid of." For a lot of people it can be a fear of speaking in public, or bugs or even dying.

Many people in our church family and community are really worried about being out of work, or having to do virtual school for the long-term, or wondering when they will see their friends again. Those on the frontline, might be afraid to go into work every day and the sick might be afraid to be in the hospital alone.

These days, I am worried about a lot of things, like if I am ever going to be able to leave my house or see friends in real life. But in general, I am most afraid of rejection and failure. I often believe that if I say or do something wrong, it will only create more problems, which causes me to hesitate. Fears keep popping up, but if I don't push through them (or have faith that things will work out). Instead, I wait to do certain tasks, putting them off until it is almost too late - letting my fear take control.

Moses was no stranger to fear. Here he was, being called by God to free his people from slavery, which is an impossible sounding task to most people. Moses had A LOT to fear when he was standing in front of that burning bush. He felt that God had asked the wrong person to do this job, that there must be someone better suited and trusted by the Israelites to help free them.

Let's face it, he was not someone who was good at public speaking (he had a stutter!), he had been raised as a prince of Egypt (he was about to defy the people who raised him), and he had

recently ran away after killing a man! On top of everything, it was highly unlikely that those in power would even listen to Moses's plea, much less agree to free ALL of their slaves.

But the excuse of why HE believes that he is the wrong choice doesn't get him anywhere. God tells him to just have faith that God will be with him every step of the way. So, he will not be doing this "nearly impossible task" alone. God's promise to Moses might have not gotten rid of all of what was causing him to hesitate and accept this challenge with open arms, but it did put him at ease. He agreed to go for it! Moses reminds us in this moment, that fear does not have the last word. God does.

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Frank: Thanks, Lindsay. You help us see that fear is part of our human experience - and our spiritual experience.

Maggie: - So, what do we need to really overcome fear? How can we put our true faith in God nowadays? Frank, can you help us?

Frank: Well, I think an important question that we need to ask ourselves these days is: Is fear really a bad thing? Fear is an inbuilt human survival instinct. Too much fear can paralyze our action, but naming our fear before God, and listening to Isaiah's words, "do not fear for I am with you. Do not be afraid for I am your God" can pave the way towards transformation - and even deeper faith. I know for me, when I faced my fear, when I really put it in God's hands, my life was changed forever.

Public speaking has not really ever been a fear of mine; I mean, I have definitely never been one to shy away from the spotlight and my family can attest to that. So, when I was asked to write and share a speech for the Stewardship season two years ago, I thought, "pfft please, I have got this!" However, the question they wanted me to address was, "How has Grace Covenant helped you grow as a Christian, as a person, or in any other way..."

Wow.... oh my gosh I had to basically summarize my entire GCPC experience in 200 words or less... I have to say it was daunting to say the least.

I remember thinking of all the ways GCPC has been a family, how it has embraced me, but also how I have not been quite honest with myself, God, or even my church family about one HUGE aspect of my life... my sexuality.

Now don't get me wrong I have known for a long time that I was gay, I might not have wanted to internalize it and recognize it, but I knew that part of me was going nowhere. I was now faced with a huge and frightening opportunity: could it be time to express how GCPC has created the environment for me to truly be myself in every way and dare come out to all of my fellow congregants?

This whole "easy, I have got this" speech just became a lot more difficult. I remember staring at the paper, my palms getting sweaty and my heart beating fast as I read and re-read the three

words written on my paper, 'I am gay.' Not scary words to many people, but to me they were terrifying because in a way, this was also me coming out to myself, really publicly recognizing and embracing my sexuality for what it is.

Well, around a month passed and it was about time for my speech. I remember seeing my name printed in the bulletin and just thinking "what am I doing?!" I almost wanted to back out, because even though I knew in heart-of-hearts that my church family would be supportive, I couldn't help but wonder, "What if they're not?"

I said a quick prayer under my breath, walked up to the podium, and looked out at you all (the faces of people I have known and respected my entire life. Your faces, ones I can't see right now, but even now through this zoom I feel your presence. Then I said it, "GCPC has helped me by providing a safe place for me to openly express myself, as a Christian, a youth, and a gay person." There was no turning back at that point. I looked into your eyes. You were with me, leaning in, and listening. I could feel your love and support.

I felt like crying - not tears of sadness, but tears of joy. It felt like a part of me so sheltered and intimate had been brought to light. I can't even describe how relieved I was to finally say it, not just in front of my friends and family, but in front of God and myself.

This fear I had, of somehow disappointing those around me, those closest to me, my friends and family; I can imagine that is a similar fear that Moses felt when he was sent by God to free the Israelites from Egypt. I mean, I know I had to come out to a room full of people, and he had to deliver an entire people from slavery, but we both had to face our fear of speaking our truth (not knowing how the message would be received).

Moses' story is a big reminder for us all that fear should not cause inaction, but instead be what helps us name our need for God. When we share our fears with God, our faith can reach new heights (and help us face what feels impossible) Faith can move mountains, shatter injustice, part waters, and save lives, it helps us find courage, and brings peace in moments of uncertainty. We can all overcome small and large fears in our lives when we REALLY have faith in God's promise. God's promise that "I will be with you."

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Lindsay: You are right. Faith IS way more powerful than fear. And when we lean on our faith, anything is possible. We can follow God wherever God leads us.

Maggie: It's kind of amazing that our Youth Group theme this year has been Fearless Faith. Before this pandemic began, we were already thinking about this topic - on mission trips and at youth group meetings, at the Lock in and in Sunday School. But now, with everything the way it is, I wonder how we as a church family can truly and faithfully follow God in bold ways, when we are feeling so constrained and isolated: stuck at home, fearful to get close to anyone and unable to reach out.

Frank: I wonder, how God is still calling us out - even now, when we are being called in? Can our faith grow while in quarantine? Maggie, what do you think?

Maggie: Normally, most of us think of being called out as being called to serve in our community, or to sit with someone new in the cafeteria, or to openly talk about our faith in Jesus...but those are all pretty hard to do right now. We can't participate in a group roadside clean up or have a conversation with a stranger.

God never stops calling out to us, so what does it mean to be called by God right now, while we're stuck at home?

Pandemics aren't usually associated with "feeling God's presence," but what if God needs us now more than ever? Maybe God is doing everything possible to be revealed to us in this moment, so we can connect in new and powerful ways and grow in our faith like never before.

Moses encountered God at the most unexpected time - in the most unexpected way. He was called out by a burning bush, which isn't something you see during your typical day as a shepherd. Moses was called to go back *into* Egypt to do a pretty terrifying task-to deliver the Israelites *out* of Egypt.

Just like Moses, we are being called by something rare and scary. When we see something unusual like a burning bush or a pandemic, we have to look closer, and in that act of looking closer, we can hear God calling us out- whether we are being called out to deliver our people to the Promised Land, or being called to test how deep our faith really is- we aren't being called to something easy. ..

I just moved to Asheville this past August, and was only really beginning to be a part of the awesome GCPC community this winter. After our mission trip to Raleigh, I was so excited to see what was in store for the rest of the year.

When we were forced to start having youth group meetings via Zoom, I was nervous that it would be weird, or that it wouldn't feel the same. Having in person connection has always been something really important for me, and I know I'm not the only one who feels that way.

But I had no reason to worry. Online youth group has been the highlight of my week recently! I have loved getting to know everyone better through scavenger hunts and breakout sessions, especially because I still hadn't gotten to know everyone when we switched to Zoom.

Logging on to youth group every Sunday at 5 has been the best way for me to feel God's presence- It reminds me that even in this time, I have a community of friends and mentors who are here to support me, and who I can in turn support during this tough time too.

In a moment like this, when we all have fears, and we don't have the physical community that allows us to build our relationship with God, we can feel alone and directionless. We are called to lean into our faith, and to pay attention to signs of God's goodness, and to signs of God calling us out to make a difference.

Worship is reaching more and more people every week- My friend in *Italy* even tuned in to watch GCPC's Easter Service! And my family got to read scripture from our living room! We can see God's presence through the world healing, through time spent with family, playing games or talking over facetime, getting sleep, exercising and spending time outside. We have an amazing opportunity here to be creative, to spend time practicing forgiveness and patience, and to have gratitude in the small things.

These glimpses of hope and light show us that, even in sickness, loneliness, and darkness, God is here, and God is the One we can always trust.

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Frank: Wow, thanks Maggie. I guess there are really so many signs of God's presence all around us, even now!

Lindsay: Yeah, it's so true that God is calling us to pay attention to them and lean on our faith like never before!

Maggie: Even though there are lots of things to be scared of, we can always trust in God's promises for us. Just like Moses did.

Frank: You are right. Moses was so fearful, but with God's help he was able to liberate the oppressed, free the enslaved, let God's people go. He was able to make a huge impact on the world.

Maggie: So we must remember that God is with us! Fear is a part of being human, but like you said earlier Lindsay, fear does not have the last word - God does.

Lindsay: When we let God help us out - and trust in God together, as a church family - our faith is strengthened. And anything is possible.

Maggie: In this time of pandemic, maybe God isn't showing up in the form of a burning bush, but we have to look closer because there are signs of God everywhere!

Lindsay: Yeah, God is present during online game nights with my grandparents!

Frank: God is present in the beautiful nature around us!

Maggie: God is present during Youth Sunday on Zoom! All of these awesome signs assure us: Don't be afraid! God is with us.

Lindsay: Don't be afraid! God never stops calling out to us.

Frank: Don't be afraid! God empowers us to finally live - with fearless faith.