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The Scripture
Judges 6:11-18

Now the angel of the LORD came and sat under the oak at Ophrah, which belonged to Joash the Abiezrite, as his son Gideon was beating out wheat in the wine press, to hide it from the Midianites. The angel of the LORD appeared to him and said to him, “The LORD is with you, you mighty warrior.” Gideon answered him, “But sir, if the LORD is with us, why then has all this happened to us? And where are all his wonderful deeds that our ancestors recounted to us, saying, ‘Did not the LORD bring us up from Egypt?’ But now the LORD has cast us off and given us into the hand of Midian.” Then the LORD turned to him and said, “Go in this might of yours and deliver Israel from the hand of Midian; I hereby commission you.” He responded, “But sir, how can I deliver Israel? My clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my family.” The LORD said to him, “But I will be with you, and you shall strike down the Midianites, every one of them.” Then he said to him, “If now I have found favor with you, then show me a sign that it is you who speak with me. Do not depart from here until I come to you, and bring out my present, and set it before you.” And he said, “I will stay until you return.”

The Message
“Courageous: Learning to Rise”
Mark Briley

What are you afraid of? This mixer question comes up pretty often, doesn't it? You could ramble off a list of surface things – spiders, clowns, fingerless gloves – or mittens as you may call them – not a big fan. Topping the list of most any survey is...? Public speaking. It's a thing for sure.

I'm not sure many would have written in my school yearbook that I was "*Most likely to be a public speaker.*" But... to everyone that signed my Seventh Grade Yearbook – you will be happy to know I did in fact, "*Stay cool.*" I've worked a way through the public speaking for the most part, but there are sometimes, you know?

Dr. Brene Brown says she still gets nervous before speaking in front of crowds. She speaks about shame and vulnerability after all – sort of sensitive subjects, you know. Organizers of the events will say to her, "*Hey, Brene, just so you know, the audience tonight includes top military brass.*" Or they'll name rocket scientists in the crowd who only want the data. No silly stuff – just the facts and stats. She doesn't go with the "*picture your audience in their underwear*" tactic to quell the nerves. She pictures her audience without the armor of their titles, positions, power or influence. If a woman has her lips pursed and her arms folded across her chest, Brene pictures what she looked like in the third grade. If a guy keeps shaking his head, making comments like, "*Winners aren't weak at work,*" she tries to picture him holding a child or sitting with his therapist.

She was backstage at one particular event where several experts were speaking, of whom she was one, and she peeked out through the curtains to see what she described as a Brooks Brothers convention -- white shirts, dark suits. When told it was an event for C-levels – she pictured sea level – S.E.A. level – as in down to earth folks. "*No,*" one of the other speakers chuckled. "*C-level like CEOs, COOs, CFOs,*" and on and on he named C-level, executive-level positions. She was immediately nervous. She's going talk to C-levels about shame and vulnerability and courage?

Picking up on her anxiety, the fellow-speaker said, "*Look through the curtain again. These are people. Just people. And **no** one talks to them about shame, and **every** single one of them is in it up to their eyeballs. Just like the rest of us. Look at them. They are people.*"

She still wasn't overly sure of herself but peeking a bit later, she saw a man who she recognized – "*We got sober around the same time, and we used to go to the same AA meetings in the mid-90s.*" She couldn't believe it. Just people, right? And then Brene was told she had a visitor outside of the green room. It was her neighbor there for the event. She happened to be a managing partner at a law firm and was attending with several other partners. She said, "*Just wanted to say hello and wish you luck!*" Once she parted, Brene found some space to catch her breath. About that encounter with her neighbor, she said, "*She may never know what it meant for me to see her that day. I appreciated the kindness and connection, but it was the simple act of seeing her that made all the difference for me. Yes, she's a partner in a prestigious law firm, but she's also a daughter, who I know recently moved her mother from assisted living to hospice.*"

She's also a mother and a wife going through a difficult divorce. People. People. People."¹ This event marked a significant shift in Brene's career, and so much of it was her learning to rise, even in the face of her fears.

How do we learn to rise in the face of *our* fears? Where do we find courage? This isn't a new challenge.

Our biblical partner in this morning's, "*We're all just people*," edition is Gideon. We find him in the First Testament book of Judges. Judges – not generally a fan favorite when it comes to Bible book faves – but there's some important lessons to be learned for sure. The Israelites are in this steady pattern of getting comfortable, going off the rails in their comfort, losing control, getting conquered by another group of people and then, and only then, crying out to God in a panic to save them. This pattern may not be that unfamiliar unfortunately. In this story of Gideon, the Israelites are in a bad place... they've fled to the hills and caves and the Midianites are having their run of the land. It's a pretty brutal existence, and like we found Moses in the first message of this series, Gideon is just trying to stay out of the fray, mind his own business, and do enough to keep himself in a decent state. Gideon's not in a great place in every sense of the word. It's understandable, right?

Another major fear people name? *Failure*. We're taught that failing is weak, and we can find ourselves not even trying for fear that it won't turn out our way – we won't be successful. Part of this societal phenomenon is that we don't learn how to fall.

I have some great conversations with my kids on the morning school-matrix drop off runs that consist of getting three kids to three schools at three different times. It's a lot, but some good time to connect with each kid to start the day. Hayes always has some doozie questions, and you never know what will pop into his mind on any given morning. "*You ever bungee jumped, Dad?*" he asked me one day this week. "*I've jumped off some high places before but never with a bungee cord attached*," I said. We talked about falling and what it feels like and how it can be a little scary even as it can be kind of a rush. "*Would you rather bungee jump or sky dive, Dad?*" Hayes loves a good game of *Would You Rather*. Before you know it, we usually get back to his all-time favorite that he first offered as a little kid, "*Would you rather live in a hole or live in a cave.*" And we laugh. But I was thinking about falling.

We don't want our kids to fall, and we hover around them when they're toddlers to keep them upright. And I'm hovering around my daughter now as she got her driver's license this week. I want to bubble wrap her and bubble wrap the car.

¹ *Dare to Lead*. Brene Brown. Penguin Random House. 2018. This series is based on the four pillars of courage as defined in this book. Dr. Brown's podcast, "Unlocking Us" also influenced this message in the sharing of the later story from *Hidden Figures*.

But how quickly we move from helicopter parenting – hovering to protect them from failure – to lawnmower parents – instead of preparing the child for the path, we prepare the path for the child. When we protect them or anyone from every possible fall, we don't instill any resiliency in each other.

When you go skydiving, as I understand it, you spend a lot of time upfront jumping off a ladder and learning how to hit the ground without hurting yourself. This is true of leadership, too – we can't expect people to be courageous and risk failure if they've not prepped for hard landings. When Dr. Brown builds her teams, she teaches falling and failing upfront. *"We expect you to be brave. That means that you should expect to fall. We've got a plan. Most of the time,"* however, *"we try to teach resiliency after there's already been a set-back or failure. It turns out that's like teaching first-time skydivers how to land after they hit the ground. Or, maybe worse, as they're free-falling."* Bottom line: if we don't have skills to get back up, we may not risk falling.

Gideon is a military leader, who's been through some stuff. He's not only learned to fall but has trained others in the practice as well. But he's got his limits right? We've all got our limits, right? I've encountered more leaders in the last several months, who have transitioned out of their roles of leadership – changed careers; taken a leave of absence; opted out. And I get it.

A beloved colleague of mine who mentors more than a hundred pastors said, *"We're seeing a wall. This past summer showed some hope – a rallying like things were on the rise and emergence was possible – people were gearing up. And then this latest COVID wall was just too much for some."*

Another friend from way back told me this week that his partner agent was getting out of the profession, and my friend would take on most of the partner's clients. *"I'll either rally,"* he said, *"or this will finally push me over the ledge."*

There's a bus driver shortage. Restaurants are closing early or for entire days to give the team they do have a break. It's a tough season.

Gideon's in such a place. In that vulnerable space, an angel appears and Gideon's all *"Oh, great. What now?"* The angel hops off his moped and puts his unicorn helmet on his seat and more happy than is appropriate for the state of Gideon's life – you know those people – the angel says, *"Greetings! God is with you, O mighty warrior!"* And in a mocking, sarcastic whine, Gideon's all *"Greetings... God is with you, da duh, da duh. Whoopy-freakin-doo. Sheesh. Mighty warrior? Little late to the game, pal."* The angel just listens as he applies some lip balm to his lips – you know, lips get a bit chapped on the open-air ride over. Gideon now faces him head on. *"Look,"* he says, *"We're getting wiped out here, angel-dude. My folks and Grands always talked about how God*

delivered us from Egypt – ain't seen none of that. Nah. God has nothing to do with us. We're done. So why don't you just make a like a tree and leave."

But then... what might be an incredible shift in the text. It's nuanced in a way that we could just gloss over, but I'm here for it this morning. What happens next is a shift from "An angel of the Lord appeared and is chatting up Gideon" to this... "Then, **God** faced Gideon directly." God is now in his face... not just an angel. Is there a shift, and God has stepped into the place of the angel? Is the angel's presence now so palpable to Gideon that it's as if God's very Self is now standing before him? Maybe you've had a moment like this. A person in your life is speaking to you, and you're not having any of it but in an instant – something shifts – a tone, your spirit, a look, a sense and Boom! It's as if God has stepped right into the moment. Pay close attention in these moments, friends. "God faced him directly," it says and then these incredible words eye-to-eye; God to Gideon: "Go in the strength that is yours. Save Israel from Midian. Haven't I just sent you?"

What strength is yours? You've got some strength. You may not feel like you do, but it's in you. You've been through some things before. You've fallen. You've failed. And you have... or you are in the process of, or you *can yet* rise again *in* that strength. I just want you to picture God standing before you in this moment.... Yes, you. Yes, in this moment. Yes, even in the struggle you're battling now whether that is physical, emotional, spiritual, relational – God standing before you saying, "C'mon. Go in this strength that is yours. Haven't I just sent you?"

That question is rhetorical. "Yes, I just sent you." You are strong. You are sent. Prepare. Get your attitude aligned. And give it your best effort. Brene says, "When we have the courage to walk into our story and own it, we get to write the ending. And when we don't own our stories of failure, setbacks, and hurt – they own us." While hesitant at first, Gideon learns to rise, and he becomes the example, still today, for people of faith and for people beyond the faith, of the power of what even one can do to conquer unimaginable obstacles.

Like Gideon, we're braving a whole new world. Things have changed – society is hosting an all-out rummage sale, clearing out things we once thought staple but lost in the giant re-jumbling of societal priorities. Change comes, and all the sudden we're afraid. What if I can't do it this time? What if I'm not valuable in this new world, this new system? What if what I know... my expertise... is not needed anymore?

"The biggest shame trigger at work," says Dr. Brown, "is fear of irrelevance." So we either double down: "That's not how we do things around here. We've never done it that way before!" And we lock down ourselves so tight that we live into that very self-fulfilling prophecy. OR... when we learn to rise, to courageously accept and embrace

change, we double down instead on learning and skill building and inviting others to help us build the effort in a new world.



Octavia Spencer's played Dorothy Vaughan in the award-winning film, *Hidden Figures*.² The movie was grounded in the stories of three black, female mathematicians who became leaders in the space race at NASA in the '60s. Dorothy Vaughan was one of them. There's a pivotal moment in the story when NASA was bringing in a new computer from IBM. They called the

computer, Watson. Watson could do calculations in seconds that would take Vaughan's team of 20 an entire day to compute. So, here's Vaughan leading this team of women calculators, and NASA brings in high-powered IBM. What does she do? She doesn't cross her arms and shake her head: *"Can't trust computers, you know!"* or *"This is the end of the world, you know."* Or *"This machine is going to ruin us all, you know!"* No. She sneaks into that room and learns how to use Watson. The big day comes. True story. The IBM people have showed up on campus to demonstrate Watson for all the staff at NASA. But... they can't get it started. Vaughan walks up and starts it. They say, *"Uhhh, what are you doing?!? Don't touch that!"* She's like, *"Can you all work it?"* They say, *"Well, we actually can't."* She says, *"I can."* And... she becomes the first black female manager at NASA, saving the jobs of her entire team of whom she then trains on the new computer. That's accepting and embracing change. That's learning to rise! I wonder if Dorothy Vaughan heard that same voice that Gideon heard, *"Go in the strength that is yours. Haven't I just sent you?"*

She could have said, *"Hey, I'm a black female in the '60s. I'm out."* Gideon did try to say to God, *"Hey... my clan is the weakest around, and I'm the runt of the litter."* What would you say about yourself? *"I'm this. I'm that. I can't. I won't. I'm afraid. I shouldn't."* But look around you... we're all just people, too... trying to find a way... hoping to find meaning and significance and contribute something to the world.

And what do we say as a church? We're *just* this. We don't have what *they* have. We don't have the resources. And before you, before us, stands the God of the universe: *"Go in the strength that is yours, Broadway. Haven't I just sent you?"*

Finally, Gideon says, *"Okay. I'll rise. But stay here for a second, I want to bring you my gift."* And God says, *"I'll wait till you get back."*

² <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt4846340/>

Are you ready friends? You are stronger than you think. We are more capable than we believe. We were made to be courageous. God is waiting for us to bring our gifts... the best of who we are... and do something extraordinary.

Song of Focus

“Rise Above”

WORDS AND MUSIC BY MICHAEL TATUM

Chorus:

Rising up, no fear, standing tall, right here.
God is always near. Rise above it.

Verse:

Even when the doubt is calling me over,
even when the fear is driving me wild,
I'm pressing on with hope on my shoulder,
I'm pressing on with God by my side.

Chorus:

Rising up, no fear, standing tall, right here.
God is always near. Rise above it.

Bridge:

No fear can hold me down.
No fear can stop me now.
No fear can tie me down.
I am fearless, I am fearless.
No fear can take me down.
No fear can sway me now.
No fear can break me down.
I am fearless, I am fearless.

BROAD HEARTS BROAD MINDS BROAD REACH