

Sermon July 20, 2014 "Beyond 'Playing It Safe'" Genesis 28:10-22 Romans 8:12-25

The apparent shoot-down of the Malaysia airliner this week has hit lots folks throughout the world very hard. One of my friends emailed me: "I will never get on an airplane again, no matter what! It's too dangerous! If that plane could be shot down while flying at 33,000 feet, we're not safe anywhere! I'm going to play it safe and drive from here on!"

I understand her reaction, but I wonder if she understands that driving is statistically a LOT more dangerous than flying on an airliner, even with the events of this week. Sometimes we don't do so well figuring out what is really "playing it safe."

There's an old story about how a farmer sat in front of his house smoking his corn cob pipe one July day. A stranger came along and asked him, "How's your cotton coming?" "Ain't got none," answered the farmer. " 'Fraid of them boll weevils." "Oh," said the stranger. "Well, how about corn?" "Didn't plant none," replied the farmer. "Might have a drought this summer and that'd wipe out the corn crop." The stranger tried again, "Well, do you have any potatoes rgowing?" "Nah, scairt of tater bugs!," said the farmer. "Well, what did you plant," asked the stranger. "Nothin'," replied the farmer, "I played it safe."

Most of us have probably tried to "play it safe" one way or another in our lives. We probably didn't bury our heads in the sand and refuse to be productive the way the man in the story did, but we may regret some of the things we never were able to risk.

A successful head of a corporation was dying. He told his hospital chaplain that he had always wanted to teach children but had never dared to try. "Mary and I were never able to have children of our own," he explained, "and I always wished I'd had the courage to volunteer to teach Sunday School or Scouts. I never even told Mary, because I was afraid it would hurt her to know that I wanted to be part of what we couldn't have. So I was silent. If only I hadn't been, I know I could have been a good teacher."

Deep inside, most of us have regrets and yearnings. To be an actress, to dance, to draw or paint, to write, to have gotten a good education and really used gifts fully. Lost dreams, lowered hopes, tempered expectations. Life can do this to lots of people. We play too safe. ...

A lot of folks try to "play it safe" when it comes to God, too. Don't get too serious about this religion stuff, don't expect a lot from God; touch the bases, do what "good" Christians are supposed to do, but don't get overly involved... But "playing it safe" with God does not work. When it comes to God, we are either "in" or "out." The first Commandment makes that clear: "You shall have NO other gods before me." Bottom line: We choose to honor God or we choose not to.

The Bible is filled with stories of people who wanted to play it safe, who failed to obey God, who didn't want to accept God's challenge to them, who held on to what they had, trying not to take the risk that God was calling them to take. As a result, they messed up their lives. After

eating of the forbidden tree - they could not obey just one rule! - , Adam and Eve heard God walking in the garden and ran away to hide, afraid to see God. Moses ran away from Egypt after committing murder. Jonah boarded a ship for Spain as he tried to avoid taking God's message to the people of Niniveh. And today we heard once again the story of Jacob running away from his brother's wrath and his father's displeasure. The human instinct for self-protection is well-documented in the biblical literature.

In today's lesson from Genesis, Jacob went away in fear, because his brother Esau wanted to kill him. It made sense that Jacob needed to be scarce for a while. After all, first he'd manipulated his older twin Esau out of his birthright, that is, Esau's right to 2/3 of the inheritance as the first-born son; and then he had been outright dishonest, cheating his brother, lying to his father, and generally being a total scoundrel as he pretended to be Esau so as to grab a blessing from his blind father as the father lay on his deathbed. A liar, a cheater...even Jacob's name meant "one who supplants." So of course he had to get away. But in his day it was a frightening thing to leave one's family and head off for another territory. Even sneaky Jacob was afraid...

Jacob was tired, so he found a stone and lay his head down to sleep. Instead of having nightmares of guilt as he tried to sleep, Jacob slept like a baby, and had the sweet dream of the promise of God's blessing and continual presence. "I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your descendants; Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land..." Through this dream Jacob discovered that God was with him: "Surely the Lord is in this place, and I did not know it..." and he named the place Bethel, which means House of God.

But the action didn't end with this reassuring dream! Still in character, when he woke up Jacob started bargaining, offering his own terms to God! After God had made the wonderful promises to Jacob, Jacob outlined his requirements to God: "If God will be with me, and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear, so that I come again to my father's house in peace, *then* the Lord shall be my God...and I will give a tenth of what I have to God."

IF. So Jacob said YES to God the only way he could, and God put up with it. God worked through Jacob even though Jacob was a scoundrel, and God used who Jacob was to bring forth a nation, Israel... The Bible makes it clear that God was with Jacob every step of the way.

A few years ago, while I was in a video store, a woman told me about all the saints medals she had acquired during recent months, because she had had such trouble with having auto accidents that she needed extra protection. Though I listened politely, I found myself thinking that she *should* have invested her money in defensive driver training... We don't need medals or incantations to create a Lucite shield of protection. Historically, Christians cannot avoid suffering in this world, especially if they are being faithful to Jesus Christ. But Christians HAVE found, as Paul did, that in the midst of suffering and difficulty they can find new hope and new identity as God's children, freed from fear because nothing can ever separate them from God's love.

Life can be scary, but we don't need to be bound by our fears. In fact, we need to be CAREFUL about how safe we try to play it. God would have us sort out our fears and the things that keep us denying the reality and call of Jesus Christ as we go through our lives. Sort out the things that are holding you back in life, that are keeping you from loving your neighbor or yourself. Look at your fears, and do not be afraid to see how they may be robbing you of abundant life.

If we say "YES" to God, if we declare: "Surely the Lord is in THIS place!," then we are challenged to "play it safe" in an entirely new way. I remember how author Keith Miller (*The Edge of Adventure*) wrote about the great University of Alabama football coach "Bear Bryant," and the fact that the players on Bear Bryant's team didn't play for the fans in the stadium, or for each other, but instead played knowing that they were playing in front of Bear Bryant. Their audience was Coach Bryant. Similarly, one who says Yes to God is to "play" for nobody less than God himself! We play for God in every instant, every decision, every conversation. The stage of our life is right in front of God! In life, in death, in life beyond death, we are in God's hands - held accountable, not to each other, but finally only to God.

It's easy to become like that farmer in the story when our faith tells us to do something our fears, resentments or satisfaction with the status quo would cause us to avoid. When someone starts talking about taking a stand for God's ideals I usually start to tune them out or at least to filter what they say, to protect myself from guilt. I have no problem agreeing that Jesus' ideals of love, forgiveness, and identification with the poor and powerless are incredibly important for us all, but when it comes to living them out I flounder. The abstract is fine, but when my life is asked to embody these things in concrete everyday, it's hard! Forgiveness often seems impossible. Love often evaporates in the face of exasperation. And addiction to comfort tends to swamp lofty ideals of preserving our world's resources.

A challenging example has been playing out on national news as we view all those children who are refugees at our southern border. "Yes, we want the poor and the hungry and the homeless of the world to have a better lot in life--but we have to protect our own jobs and our own lives." So what do Christians do about our Lord who was himself a refugee as a child?

Christians cannot duck in a field somewhere, running away from issues of racism, discrimination, or other injustice, simply by saying these things don't relate to us. For chances are that God will seek us out. God will give us a dream, an understanding, a sense of discomfort, or a discovery, and call us to trust and serve the way of Jesus right in the face of our fears. God will help us to see that OUR lives can make a difference. For a Christian, the *real* "Playing it safe" is not hiding from the difficulties of our society, but facing them head-on while praying to understand how Jesus himself would have faced them, trusting all the while that God is with us and will guide us.

Jesus told his followers, "I send you out." Paul challenged all Christians: "Don't live according to the flesh, for if you do, you will die. For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back in fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption." If we say yes to God, we too will be sent out in some way or called to take steps in faith. Perhaps little ones, perhaps dramatic ones... Every day we must choose our

Master. Will I serve God today and accept whatever mission God provides for me? Will I watch for the opportunity to live and speak and do as I believe Jesus would do in the same situation? Will I begin my day with a prayer for guidance? Will I walk down the street praying that, if the Lord needs me, I will be available to share God's hope and love with someone needing them? Will I remember the source of my life and my joy? Or will I be like that farmer, serving my fear and therefore empty of everything else?

God sends folks out in little ways and big ways. A person may be walking through a department store mentally weighing whether or not to commit suicide. Your smile may give this person a hope of worth. News may bring to light a flawed legislation: your letter may influence Congress to make needed changes. You may hear of pain similar to your own experience, and be able to reach out. You may send money to help people recover from a disaster. You may think of someone lonely and pick up the telephone, transforming a day. There are all kinds of missions! There are all kinds of ways to discover that YOU are part of God's work in this world.

We are like an apple tree that God has blessed with an abundance of apples. The apple tree does not eat the apples, they are for others. Your gifts, your blessings are given in order that you may minister to the needs of others. The gift of teaching is useless unless others are taught; art gains its value not only through the eyes of the artist but through those who are able to appreciate the skill of the artist. If you have the gift of healing it is useless until it is shared. We must be shared.

We live in a frightening world, complex in its problems and opportunities, often apathetic in its relationship to God. If we say Yes to God, we will find out, as did Jacob, that the Lord is in this place (right where we are!). If we say Yes to God, God will send us out: out of our shells, out of our houses, out of our church, not on our missions, but on God's mission. And we need not be afraid - of each other, of the bogey man, of ourselves, of terrorists, of illness, of *anything* - because, when it all boils down, there are only two things that can happen to any one of us: Life, and death... and God has BOTH of these things in his everlasting arms.

So I encourage myself, and I encourage you, "Say YES to God." Let God give you a dream; let God be the basis of your hope; DISCOVER for yourself that right where you struggle the most, God is there. Do not play it safe by the standards of the world; play it safe by living in the knowledge, love, and challenge of God. Remember: in life, in death, in life beyond death, we are not alone. God is with us! Thanks be to God! Amen.