

***God Took Me from Following the Flock***  
***Rev. Thomas Cary Kinder***  
***United Church of Strafford, Vermont***  
***July 11, 2021 Seventh Sunday after Pentecost***  
***from Psalm 85; Amos 7:10, 12-15; Mark 1:4, 9, 14; 6: 14-16***

**Call to Worship:** Bill Coffin said, “I love the recklessness of faith. First you leap, and then you grow wings.”

I had a boyhood friend who was terrified of the high dive at the swimming pool. It took him a long time to dare to leap, and his first jump was a painful disaster because his flailing arms smacked the water. But once he had succeeded, he jumped again, and again, and ended up taking more daring leaps than anyone. The spiritual life is like that. We may suffer from a terrible fear or grief or illness or loss or addiction or wrong, we experience a trial that we cannot get past, and then as a last desperate leap we turn to God in faith and, gradually or sometimes immediately, we feel relief, restored to the Tao, the path of life. Once we have tasted that joy, we find courage, through faith in God’s higher power, to risk more. Let us practice that high dive of faith again today and grow the wings we need for the next leap God is calling us to make in our lives. Let us worship together...

**Time with the Children:** The Bible is full of stories about people getting scared and running away. God called Jonah to go tell a powerful king that he was in trouble. Jonah got scared and hopped on the first boat out of town, but a storm came up and Jonah got swallowed by a whale that brought him back to God’s mission. Moses ran away, too, but then there was a burning bush. Elijah ran away but there was an earthquake, wind and fire, and then the voice of God spoke to Elijah in silence. Even Jesus was scared and prayed that he could get out of his crucifixion. But the reason they are all in the Bible is that being scared and running away was not the end of the story. They found the courage they needed. Jesus prayed, not my will but thy will be done and God sent an angel to strengthen him. The reason we have a Bible and a church is because they found the courage they needed, and now we have to find the courage we need to keep the church and love and world going. So what can we do when we are scared, to help us be brave? Pray!

*the sermon begins on the net page*

## *God Took Me from Following the Flock*

The prophet Amos lived in a prosperous and stable period of Israel's history. Life seemed good, but as the rich got richer, the poor were getting poorer. The God of Abraham and Moses became unpopular with the ruling classes, because the scriptures demanded that the poor be cared for and justice and neighborly love rule the land. So those in power were turning to other gods, just as white supremacist Christian nationalists today are turning to another version of God that can allow them to oppress and exclude and do violence to those who threaten their hold on power.

Amos was a shepherd and an arborist, a dresser of sycamore trees, not of a priestly or ruling class, but God spoke to Amos and sent him to warn the king and leaders of Israel that God would bring destruction and exile to the land if they did not return to God's ways. Amos said, "God took me from following the flock, and said to me, 'Go, prophesy to my people Israel.'"

It was daring and dangerous. Prophets could be killed, but Amos had the courage to say what Israel needed to hear, and his example has inspired other prophets over the millennia to stand up and speak what God insisted they say.

People identified Jesus as a prophet like one of the prophets of old. Jesus took up John the Baptist's slogan after John was arrested, calling people to undergo metanoia, a spiritual awakening, a transformation of consciousness. He called them to be part of the revolution for the realm of God, a society based on the equality and justice implied in love of neighbor and the Golden Rule, which was in opposition to the realms of Herod and Caesar.

We need to imagine what it was like for Jesus and his followers to hear the story of the beheading of John the Baptist. Imagine how much courage it took to keep going. They knew that what they believed and how they lived directly opposed the mainstream culture. They knew that there could be a cost to their faithful discipleship, the cost of being estranged from family, neighbors and society, and quite possibly the cost of exile, prison or execution.

We need to admire their courage and also have compassion for them. They were carpenters and farmers and fishermen, people like us who wanted comfort and peace as much as anyone, people who preferred not to get beheaded or crucified. Yet they had the courage to risk everything for the sake of what was right. They had only an inner sense that this is what God was calling them to do, and the joy of seeing the Spirit of God flowing through Jesus and the community that formed around him.

Were they scared? You bet they were. I am so grateful for the scene of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, where he prayed in such anguish that he was sweating blood. I am so grateful that Jesus prayed his way through his fear and found the faith and courage to keep going.

I know those girls in the Amish school house in 2006 were terrified by the man holding them hostage, and yet when it was clear that he was about to shoot them, the two oldest girls, Barbara and Marian Fisher, aged 13 and 11, begged him to kill them and let the younger girls go free.

I am sure that everyone in that African-American Bible Study in Charleston, South Carolina in 2015 was terrified when the young white man pulled out his gun and told them he was going to kill them, and yet 26 year old Tywanza Sanders threw himself in front of his 87 year old aunt to try to save her life.

Think of young Bill Coffin and all the other Freedom Riders risking their lives, or think of a shy girl playing an angel in her first Christmas Pageant.

Courage is one of the most moving, meaningful and beautiful human traits. The Psalm says, “Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet; righteousness and peace will kiss each other.” Heaven and earth meet in faithful, courageous hearts and actions, and the energy generated by them is greater than any weapons of violence or any empire. It is a power great enough to change lives and change the course of history, even when it leads to a bullet or a cross.

Maybe that is why it is so important that we remember the beheading of John the Baptist, not so much for its own sake, but to remind us that Christ knew it could happen to him and he kept going anyway, and the early church knew it could happen to them, and they kept going anyway.

Churches at their best are places of courage and heroism. Those tend to be the churches that thrive. A few years ago an article came out about congregations that were vital and growing at a time when most are not. It said that each had its unique combination of strengths, but they all “exhibit imagination, intelligence, heart-felt enthusiasm, and courage. Their members ask, What gives us joy? What are we really about? What are we [courageously] going to...seek?”

The article urges congregations to go through a process similar to the one we went through in 2018 that resulted in our Future Directions Statement and Fulfilling Our Vision work. The

Church Council is planning a similar time of congregational conversation and discernment this fall.

This takes faith when society is turning away from the church and its ideals. It takes courage to advocate and agitate for the realm of God on earth, to stand up to the powers that are still worsening the climate crisis and racism and economic injustice and working to destroy the democratic principles of our nation.

It takes faith and courage to stand up to people who align with QAnon and are preparing for a violent civil war against those who oppose them. We have QAnon neighbors in Strafford.

It is only natural to be afraid to follow Christ and be Christ's church in such a society. Every one of us may be afraid on some level, but that makes acts of faith and courage more moving, meaningful and beautiful.

We are at a turning point in history, as Amos was. God is taking us from following the flock and asking us to be brave and bold. God needs our prophetic words and actions. The realm of God on earth needs this congregation.

The first thing we can do is make this an outpost of God's realm, a model loving community as we emerge from the pandemic. For some of us, that in itself is an invitation to act with courage. Introverts, shy people, people suffering from anxiety or depression, people feeling vulnerable because of a hard time they are going through—there are many reasons why speaking up and sharing our truth or reaching out and connecting across differences can be hard, but participating in a caring and supportive community is one of the best things we can do for ourselves and each other and this world.

Every act of faith and courage on behalf of love is part of the movement to establish God's realm on earth, so let us recognize and celebrate those bold acts, large or small, and may the light they shine be a source of strength and joy that enables us to say yes whenever the Spirit wants to take us from following the flock to follow in Christ's way.

Let us pray in silence...