

## **STRONG AND OF GOOD COURAGE**

**PSALM 27:1-14 (early)**

**ACTS 23:1-11**

**JOSHUA 1:1-9**

**ROCKLAND CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH  
THE REVEREND DR. D. ELIZABETH MAURO  
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The strongest and most courageous person I have ever known would have laughed if I had told her that. She would have looked at me and said, “But honey, I’m nobody. And I don’t feel strong or courageous.” And yet, she laid her first born in an apple crate, and lived in a deserted mining camp in Idaho while her unemployed husband walked to California, stopping in Oregon to pan enough gold to get him some bus fare. She waited in faith that he would find employment and send for her and their daughter. She kept a home, she raised a family, worked in church, learned to read Chinese, dabbled in painting, and traveled in the Middle East and Europe. Her name was Sari McGregor, the woman after whom I named my daughter.

Parts of Sari McGregor’s life were remarkable and parts were quite ordinary. She knew life was a risk, a gamble...how clear this must have been the day her husband, Al, walked out of that mining camp, abandoned because it had given up all its ore. Can you imagine that?

Sari didn't insulate herself or try to control life to minimize the risk. Neither did she take it all stoically, making life deceptively easy. Rather, she threw herself into her faith and onto her God, throughout all of her life. Al died before she did and this was, perhaps, her greatest challenge. Relying on God to reunite them, she died naturally on the one year anniversary of Al's death, now 18 years ago. Indeed, Sari was strong and of good courage, even if she'd laugh to hear it.

I have been lucky to have had this and other Christian examples of strength and good courage in my life. Strength and courage don't come easily to many of us. Perhaps that is why God had to admonish the Israelites three times to be strong and of good courage.

We pick up our scripture lesson just after the death of Moses. Moses' replacement was Joshua, son of Nun. God chose him saying, "My servant Moses is dead. Now proceed to cross the Jordan, you and all this people, into the land I am giving (you)." This is a reminder that God's covenant is alive, and it will be fulfilled through Joshua leading the Israelites into foreign territory. But they will not be successful without faith in the God that upholds them, so God gives them three reminders.

First, "be strong and very courageous," says God, "for you shall put this

people in possession of the land which I swore to give.” The first thing Joshua needs strength and courage for is his role in God’s work. This is not simply crossing the river Jordan. It is about Joshua being God’s agent to bring about God’s purposes. Whenever we’re partnered with God, it takes strength and courage, for the things and purposes of God are awesome.

Second, God says, “Be strong and courageous, being careful to act in accordance with all the law that my servant Moses commanded you.” This second reminder is one of commitment to the ways of God. When people want to walk in their own ways, it takes strength and courage to choose God’s ways instead.

The third thing God said was, “Be strong and courageous; do not be frightened or dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go.” In this reminder comes the crux of faith: no matter what lies ahead, however frightening or dismaying, the Lord is with you...no ifs, ands or buts. The Lord your God is with you wherever you go.

Three reminders: the importance of being God’s partner, the importance of commitment to God’s ways, and the importance of trusting in God’s presence. They all take strength and courage, especially in a world that increasingly devalues faith, commitments and trust. Which means God’s call to be strong and courageous is given to us, in this time and place, that we might be the best

Christians we can be. Partners with God, commitment to God, and trust in God. Lets look at these three for these are at the heart of being Christian, and God knows it is not easy. Be strong and courageous.

First, our partnership with God. God has always depended upon human beings to accomplish mighty works. We often think to ourselves that God is so great, almighty and powerful that he doesn't need us. After all, what can I accomplish, just me, all by myself? The answer is anything God wants me to, if I commit myself to him. Being a Christian is not a mere description of our beliefs or a label of honor. To be a Christian is to accept a role, a job, a duty in making this world a better place. We work to show God's love to others. We act to bring more justice and mercy to life. We conduct ourselves with respect and dignity for all other people. We criticize the things that need change and then work creatively to bring about something new, better, stronger, more reflective of God's love and compassion. Be strong and courageous.

Commitment to God. This has to do with honor and obedience...two old-fashioned ideas. If we are honored by the Divine with grace and blessing and love, is it not right to respond with honor? But we are not equal partners with God, and that is the obedience part...not a very popular concept. Only once have I ever preformed a wedding where the vows contained the admonition to "obey."

We're too independent and sophisticated for that anymore. Except, it is still a part of Christian life to obey God...it is to accept his commandments, embrace his beatitudes, and seek his instruction. Be strong and courageous.

Trust in God. In many ways, this is harder than obedience. We live in a world that seems increasingly complex and it is hard to know who to trust. We insulate ourselves from hardship by isolating ourselves and ignoring the struggles of others. We build emotional fortresses to keep pain away - unsuccessfully, I might add. To trust that God is with you where ever you go...in joy and in hardship, in health and in pain is to believe in the unseen, and the unscientific and the unquantifiable fact of God. It takes strength to trust in God's presence and courage to rely on it.

If we are to be Christians who make a difference in the world, we must take up our role as God's partners, working for justice, peace, charity and reconciliation. We must be committed and obedient to God. Our churches, our worship and our business must be firmly rooted in that obedience. And we must trust in a God whom we cannot see at will, but can sometimes discern in the transforming moments of grace that touch us. None of these things is easy. To stand before God and declare our partnership, our commitment and our trust takes strength and courage. God knows this.

To strive day after day after day for what is right, what is just, what is loving and peace promoting as Christians must, takes strength and courage. God knows this.

To be obedient to the ways of God and not be given over to that part of our world that is ungodly takes strength and courage. God knows this.

To trust in the Lord, as the one who creates goodness and works wonders takes strength and courage. God knows this.

But God does not ask any more of us than he is willing to give, and by his grace we are made ready to be his partners, his people, his hope in this world. Yes, we are made ready for the awesome work of God. Be strong and of good courage. As God's people, the best is yet to come.

AMEN