

“Strength to Serve”
A service of gratitude for first responders.
July 5, 2020
Pastor Jenothy Irvne

Reading from Strength for Service by Isaac - video

Prayer - Teach us O Lord to respond to you in faith and love. Give us courage to follow.

Message

We follow the story on TV, our phones, the Internet, or read about it as it unfolds – a critical car accident, a horrific murder, a deadly fire, a peaceful protest or rally gone horribly wrong – and everybody is shocked at the tragedy of it all. Sometimes it’s people we know and sometimes it’s not, but with mass media it’s all personal. Sometimes we cry, even when we don’t know the victims. Sometimes we get angry at the injustice of it all. We sympathize with the family members who lost a loved one, post on Facebook at how shocked and sorry we are, offer prayers and condolences – and so we should. It’s part of our humanity.

But we don’t always think about the untold story – that of the first responders for whom it is always personal. The officer who goes in and discovers the bodies of murder victims, the paramedics who work on the accident victim in an ambulance on the way to the hospital only to learn he or she did not make it, the ER nurses who literally can feel life and death slip through their hands, or the firefighters who run into a burning building with hopes of saving someone and then have to come to terms with the fact that, despite all their efforts, the outcome was not the one for which they had hoped. Any one of these folks then still have to face grieving family members and tell them that they’re sorry, there was nothing more they could do.

We don’t always think about the untold story of what it takes emotionally, mentally, physically and spiritually to work every day expecting the worst might happen, anticipating that they will rise to the calls placed before them, sometimes putting themselves in extreme danger.

They don't know what crisis is in store, yet are willing to go and serve. Such service, I think, is an act of courage, compassion, and faith.

Today we recognize, honor, and say thank you to our first responders; the women and men who stand on the front lines in ways most of us will never understand. Women and men whose job it is to help people at the worst of times, in the hardest of times, in the most unpredictable of times. Whose job it is to protect both victim and perpetrator; the injured and the one who caused injury. Whose job it is to run into a situation when everyone else is running out.

Are they perfect, no. Are they to be put on a pedestal and idolized, no. Are there some who make bad choices or go too far, yes. Are there some who allow power to go to their head, yes. Is there systemic brokenness in the institutions they serve, yes. Should that keep us from thanking them for holding the line, keeping us safe, and responding to our needs, no. Should that keep us from recognizing the sacrifice and toll it can take on them and their families, no. Does it mean we forget about the ones among them who do their job and do well, with integrity and character? No.

I believe we can learn some things from first responders. I think we can learn something about courage, commitment, sacrifice, and self-control.

It takes courage to stand in harm's way on purpose or by choice; to confront danger, to face unknown situations, to talk down a volatile or violent stranger, to make life and death decisions in a matter of seconds. It takes commitment to stay the course when the course is nothing but rough roads, blind corners, long nights, hard times, intense people, endless calls, and unpredictable circumstances. It takes sacrifice to give a lifetime of service to a role that often takes you away from those you care about and love; to be called away from family gatherings, your child's birthday party, a cook-out or dinner party with friends, or give up holidays and planned vacations at the last minute. It takes self-control to offer aid and care to someone who

doesn't want you to or would rather die. It takes self-control to NOT let disrespectful name calling and hate-filled vulgarities distract you from what you are called to do. It takes self-control to stand in the face of anger, violence, instability, danger, and sheer chaos and make rational, clear minded decisions.

The people we call first responders take enormous risks every time they step out their door, put on their gear, load the truck, start the squad car, or begin their shift at the hospital; it is not something they just do, it is a life they live.

That got me wondering. Isn't that how we as followers of Jesus need to live our lives? With courage, commitment, sacrifice, and self-control? I wonder if we aren't to be "first responders" of sorts - people dedicated to living out and living on the spiritual front-lines? People responding to the cry of the needy, the plea of the broken; being the face of Jesus, the love of God.

I don't want to take the metaphor too far or make a connection where there is not one, but I wonder...

Scripture - Mark 1:1-20

Our text today is about first responders; those who took enormous risks to answer a strange man calling to them from the shoreline. Like our modern day first responders, the disciples answer a sounding alarm, particularly in Mark's telling of the story. This is the gospel that begins not with a sweet birth narrative, but with a wild man from the wilderness, John the Baptist, shouting words from Isaiah. In just a few short verses, we have a whirlwind of activity, as Jesus is baptized, then spends 40 days being tempted in the wilderness (captured in two verses). John is removed from the narrative by arrest, and Jesus enters again. These verses are

full of markers of time, which almost make the start to the gospel read as a sounding alarm; a high-level alert that something big is happening.

As is common in Mark, the word “immediately,” or “at once” punctuates the responses of these two sets of brothers. They don’t appear to have superhuman characteristics, or even be particularly qualified for such a calling as they received. They are after all fishermen. Made their living by throwing nets into the water, catching, and selling fish. They have even been described as “rough mechanics,” (Calvin) meant to illustrate that the story was not about who they were, but about who God would help them become[iii].

Jesus tells them he will show them how to fish for people! That had to be weird don’t ya think?! Depending on the translation, we are somewhat misled. Many translations of the call of these first followers has Jesus implying that he will teach them to fish; a new technique or method perhaps. It is an implied action / verb. In reality, the Greek actually means Jesus promises to make them fishermen; to shape them into a new kind of fishermen. It’s a noun, not a verb.

It wasn’t about the latest in net technology, bait or high level leadership fishing skills, it was them Jesus wanted: their hearts, their life, their humility and moldability - their willingness to learn, grow, change, and build a new community.

That means this story is not about teaching a particular set of skills, leadership styles or strategies, but about transforming the lives of these first responders in a way that shapes their very identity, so that following Jesus would not just be something they clock in and do, but be a part of the central core to who they are. They are not called to just add one more thing to their busy lives, and pencil Jesus in for a shift every so often.

They were called to embrace a whole new way of life, one that involves crazy amounts of courage, total commitment, bold sacrifice, and strong self-control. And immediately, even with the full weight of their entire identity at stake, they left their nets and followed him.

This is a story about more than just four fishermen. It is also about us, now, and what we are going to make of the realization that the kingdom of God is here and now and in need of first responders. This text calls us to consider whether or not we might identify as first responders in faith.

Do we live our faith with courage and commitment? Do we speak out for those who have no voice? Protect the vulnerable? Listen to the marginalized? Or do we let trained leaders do that? Do we respond and engage our faith from a place of sacrifice? Do we go without so others might go with? Go the extra mile even when we know it will go unnoticed or unappreciated? Or let the “called” handle that part of it? Do we practice and improve our self-control? So that we can walk alongside those who think differently or live differently? So that we might show kindness, respect, and compassion in the face of mean spirited criticism, harsh judgmentalism, and emotionally charged situations? So that we might better ourselves rather than belittle others. Or do we let the professional Christians do that?

Being a first responder is not an 8-5 or 7-3 kind of job. Being a first responder is a way of life. Following Jesus, like those first four followers we read about in Mark, is not a clock in and clock out kind of life either. Those first responders of faith gave everything; their way of life to follow Jesus. It took great courage, commitment, sacrifice, and self control. I expect believers today are called to no less.

It might look and sound a little different but it is still us Jesus wants - it is our moldability he seeks. Especially in today’s world, in our current climate and state of

affairs. We need first responders of faith: people willing to walk into tough places of the head and the heart, and ask the hard questions when no one else will and face uncomfortable situations when others look away. We need people open to transformation, theirs and others. People who can love Jesus more than their political views, cultural differences, social norms or their desire to be right. People who can let God be God and put their trust in the Holy Spirit more than their ego, position, or experience.

I pray that on this weekend when we celebrate our country's independence and freedom, we realize it comes with a price, not only paid by those in the past but those first responders of today. I pray we recognize that not all are free, and until they are none of us are. I pray that all of us will take a moment to thank a first responder and not let the actions of some taint the service of all. I pray all of us will reflect on what it means to be a first responder of faith and how we can live our lives differently, more fully and more completely. I pray all of us will find healing and hope in the One who first responded to us.

In Jesus name, amen.

Thank you Rev. Elizabeth Lovell Milford for her words and reflection on Mark.

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