

## **DEFINING MOMENTS (1Samuel 3:1-10, JN 1:43-51)**

Sermon by the Rev. Corinne Hodges

Sunday, January 18, 2009, St. John of the Cross

It was the 1968 Summer Olympics in Mexico City. Mamo Wolde (“Wall-day”) of Ethiopia, the winner of the marathon, had crossed the finish line more than an hour earlier. The crowd had waited and cheered as other finishers entered the arena. But now it was getting late, cool and dark. Many started to leave. As the last of the crowd remained, finally the sirens could be heard, bringing up the rear of the race. Into the stadium hobbled John Stephen Akhwari from Tanzania, the last runner. The crowd rose to their feet and cheered. Akhwari picked up his pace as best as he could, limping in pain. You see, Akhwari had fallen during the race and injured his leg, so badly in fact that he had cut his knee and dislocated his joint. Now he made his final lap of the 400-meter stadium with bandages wrapped around his leg to the applause and surprise of many.

After Akhwari finished the race, he was asked why he had not quit. After all he was injured and he had no chance of winning a medal. Akhwari simply responded, “My country did not send me 5,000 miles to start the race; they sent me to finish.” This story of John Stephen Akhwari has gone down in the history books and is known by many as “the greatest last place finish ever.” This lone runner completed a race against all odds and rational sense, becoming a symbol of hope, endurance and perhaps, most of all, courage.

Courage. Our OT reading today is also a story about courage. Now many read this story of Samuel and hear the themes of hearing God’s call, following God’s voice, seeking and heeding advice from our elders, like Eli...but also there is courage. Eli was just a young boy, how young we have no idea. His mother Hannah had been barren but desperately wanted a child. So she prayed to God and promised that if God blessed her with a child, she would give that child back to God. And so Hannah gave birth to Samuel and kept her word, giving Samuel to the priest Eli to train for God’s service.

At the point of our reading today, Eli is an elder man, again we do not know how old. We know that he is resting at home, not at the temple. His eyesight is poor and he must know that his life on earth is coming to an end. He understands that at this time in his life, his role is that of a mentor, preparing the next generation to lead God's people. Samuel was his mentee. And so this relationship was developing. Eli offered Samuel advice, gave him instructions on how to serve, how to recognize, listen and follow God's voice.

It certainly took courage for young Samuel to face God and listen. God had not been made known to him yet and I imagine hearing that voice was a scary thing at first. But I also see real courage in what Samuel had to do the next day, when Eli asked him to tell him the whole truth of what God had said to him. This could not have been an easy thing to do. Eli had provided so much for Samuel, not just learning but shelter and food. My guess is Eli had become family in a way, kind of like a grandfather figure who offers wisdom, guidance and love. And now Samuel was faced with the decision of whether or not to tell the truth, to deliver the bad news to the man he respected and cared for. He had to tell Eli that he would not be part of Israel's future due to the sins of his sons and of himself, for not disciplining his sons. It could have been a whole lot easier to avoid the question or tell Eli a lie. But in the end, Samuel does the hard and right thing, he shares God's message word for word.

Doing hard things...that takes courage. All of us reach points in our life where we have to make tough decisions. We go about our lives until we reach a fork in the road and we have to choose whether to go one way or the other. We might try to put it off for a while or avoid it, but eventually we have to do something. Leadership guru and author John C. Maxwell calls these "defining moments." And Maxwell points out that while "we often focus on the milestones of life, important events that mark seasons or accomplishments...some of our defining moments come as total surprises, appearing at times of crises like facing a personal failure, taking a stand on an issue, experiencing suffering, being asked to forgive, or making an unpleasant choice."<sup>1</sup>

Everyone has defining moments in life, adults, seniors, teenagers. Nineteen-year-old twins Alex and Brett Harris tell the story about Betsy in their book, appropriately titled “Do Hard Things.” Betsy is a teenager who is with her friends in the cafeteria at school. Her friends are gossiping about a girl who is pregnant. They have never noticed her before. Betsy looks across the cafeteria at the girl, who is sitting alone. Betsy begins to wonder what the girl is feeling and if she has any friends. That’s when she felt God nudge her, urging her to approach and befriend the girl. Betsy asked, “Why now, God? Can’t You find someone else to reach out to her? What will everyone think of me? I’m afraid.” The fact is that although Betsy heard God calling her to follow and go to the girl, she did not. God gave her the same message three days in a row, but Betsy still did not act and the girl left school shortly thereafter. This was a defining moment for Betsy. She came to that fork in the road and amidst peer pressure and self-preservation, made a difficult decision. She chose what appeared to be the easier path. Her response today: “I’ll always regret the way I ignored God’s call to do what God told me to do. I’ll always wonder what she was like, how she ended up the way she was, and what could have happened if I’d talked with her.”<sup>2</sup>

Last week in my message I mentioned the word “INSPIRATION” and how much of who we are and what we do stems from Spirit-filled inspiration in our lives. I don’t know about you, but when I hear the stories about the lone finisher Akhwari or young Eli or Betsy, I am inspired. Their examples give me the courage to listen to God, make tough decisions and do the right thing. But to be honest, I do not have to look as far as that. I can look at my own life and know that I have learned from the tough choices I have made. And I am sure you can do the same.

What have been the defining moments in your life thus far? If you are like me, sometimes you have taken the higher, more difficult road, the one you knew was right. Other times, you’ve gone for the shortcut. But the fact is that all those decisions and all those forks in the road have led you to right here, where you are now and today.

God gives human beings freewill and we use it hopefully to the best of our ability. God trusts us that much. For that, we should be grateful.

There is a theory that defining moments make us who we are, but actually it is the other way around. Who we are underneath, down deep, shapes how we handle life-changing points in our lives. Strong faith-filled people like Samuel have great courage, regardless of their age. They catch a glimpse of God's greater vision and are able to add to it by revealing it to others. With each passing day and experience, may we become stronger in our faith. May our belief in God guide our decisions and actions so that we are more able to follow Christ, giving us the courage to reveal God's truth in our world.

<sup>1</sup>*For more on Maxwell's defining moments, see chapter 3, Defining Moments Define Your Leadership, in his book, "Leadership Gold: Lessons I've Learned from a Lifetime of Leading," Thomas Nelson: Nashville, 2008.*

<sup>2</sup>*Betsy's story is on pages 75-77 in Alex and Brett Harris' book, "Do Hard Things: A Teenage Rebellion Against Low Expectations," Multnomah Books: Colorado Springs, 2008.*