

Be safe.

I hear that all the time these days; from the nightly newscast signoff to people in the grocery store. It is not a new phrase, I heard it every time I left the house as a teenager. But it is a phrase that has become common lately. Be safe. What does that actually mean to us, and how are we to deal with that meaning in our relationship with God?

Up until the beginning of this year, I had been living under the illusion that I was in charge, if nothing else, at least my own health. But 2020 has had a great impact on that illusion. On the 5th of January, I had a major heart attack. The surprise among my family and friends was understandable. I had followed the directions for a good diet, regular exercise and appropriate weight. Those things had not provided me with safety. I was not in complete charge of my destiny and I certainly wasn't in control.

Then, after that first month of the year the unbelievable events kept unfolding. People that I loved died unexpectedly, a deadly virus took hold in the world, and now, unbelievable and terrifying events taking place throughout this country; throwing our cities and communities into nightly protests and requiring us to take a close look at who we are as a people and a country. And with these things,

my security and safety that I thought I had so carefully crafted came tumbling down. For the first time in my life, I am identifying deeply with the prophet Jeremiah. I shake my fist at God, I shake my fist at the news on TV and I shake my fist at what is becoming a lonely and heartless world. And, like Jeremiah, I find it difficult to find a safe haven.

I do not feel that I am alone in these feelings. So much of what we had thought was a firm foundation under our feet; our daily lives, our friends, our interest groups, and our church family has been fundamentally altered. The security of our own home, for many of us our shelter and refuge, has custody of us, as the world outside has become off limits and a place of peril. And yet, for many of us, we continue to be drawn into the needs of the world and the difficult decisions surrounding how to be in the world caring for the needs of others, while at the same time taking care of ourselves.

That is what the disciples must have been feeling like after being sent out into the world by Jesus. Chapter 10 of Matthew is sometimes referred to as the Great Commissioning. Jesus has called the twelve, and now is sending them into communities to bring the people God's good news, to minister to the sick and brokenhearted, to feed the hungry, and to show them the light of God. But Jesus'

warnings throughout this Chapter are unmistakable. There are dangers out there. There are a myriad of perils laying in wait that could not only harm them, but kill them. People who have put their trust in human institutions; laws, customs, and rituals will be unsettled by hearing of a new order, and those in authority to maintain the old order will be threatened. And that is as true today as it was then.

Kelly Joe Phelps wrote these words that many of us have sung over the years:

I am the light of the world, you people come and follow me. If you follow and love, you'll learn the mystery of what you were meant to do and be.

The chorus tells us the most important factor in discipleship; learning what you were meant to do and be. That is the hard work for you to do before venturing far from home. What is God's plan for you? How and what do you hear God whispering in your ear. Remember, all of the men that Jesus chose had different strengths and weaknesses. Finding yourself in God is finding out your purpose. Everyone of us deserves to be here to grow into who we are meant to be.

After the chorus, the song goes on to delineate specific ways to practice discipleship; healing broken souls, making the powerful care, finding lost and lonely people, or freeing prisoners. Other, more timely ways that that many of us

have found lately are to advocate for the disenfranchised, speak against power for power's sake, and reminding those around us that no one is free until freedom belongs to us all. And to those things we become disciples.

As Barbara Brown Taylor reminds us about discipleship: "Sometimes it may mean staying at home... doing less every day, not more. Sometimes God calls us to small parts in the scheme of things, and sometimes God calls us to great deeds. But we are all called. We are all called to identify with the marginalized and disregarded people of the world. We are all called to shout out against any order which causes them to be treated as inferior".

In doing these things, we may place ourselves outside of our safety zones. As Jesus warns his disciples of what to anticipate when they begin to love Jesus more than the safety of their lives, we also run the risk of offending our family, and our friends. We, also, may find ourselves outside of conventional norms, and we, also, may find ourselves alone. But we are not to fear. Because within the risks there is a promise that we will find a new self and be more alive than we have ever been.

To discipleship, Barbara Brown Taylor also offers this: How do we find the courage to get up in the morning, knowing that every pair of eyes that pleads with us that day will be his eyes, asking us for something to eat or drink or wear, asking us for

recognition, for time, for attention? That is the question, but the Bible is not a book with answers in the back. All I know is that we are asked to wrestle with that fact , to let it challenge us and unsettle us...”

Jesus called those ordinary fishermen into a movement, to join a revolution that is still going on, a revolution that involves standing for love rather than for hate, standing for involvement rather than lack of engagement, standing for purpose rather than stagnant boring days. So we might allow ourselves to awaken every day with the idea that we have an opportunity to turn again to follow – to be used by God in some way. Following Jesus is the ongoing process of turning our lives in the same direction as Jesus’ life. Sometimes it may mean doing the same things we have always done, or doing those things in a new way or for different reasons. God will not prevent bad things from happening. That is a kind of magician or “On-call” God, who controls us all the time and always intervenes. Instead, our God is our refuge when life becomes unbearable or when something happens to someone we love. We can find safety in God because our God stands with us – holding us up to the light and giving us hope that there is a future. We are people of faith and when we follow in the steps of Jesus, we can muster the courage

expand our safety zones and travel with God beyond the borders of our own fears.