

Sermon: *Big Risks, Bigger Faith, Biggest God*

Scripture: Hebrews 11

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Date: October 21, 2007

It starts with exposure. Missions starts with an exposure to the reality of the world around us. Jesus said in John 4:35: "I tell you, open your eyes and look at the fields!" When I was a child and teenager at this church, I remember when missionaries like Ed Aulie would come and share with us. His stories of what God was doing in Mexico were incredible! What adventure! God was changing lives there! I was intrigued by him and I wanted my life to be filled with excitement about the big things God was doing. Finally in high school, in 2001, the Guatemala exposure trip was organized, and I had the chance to see first hand the harsh realities of our world and the great works God was doing. You've all probably heard about the dump in Guatemala City that we were exposed to. We saw people digging through football fields of dirty trash to try to find bottles, cans, or anything of value. We saw God working in the hearts of children rescued from the dump through ministries. We saw prisoners worshipping Jesus with all their heart, having been transformed from a despicable life. Have you been exposed to the harsh realities of the world? Have you opened your eyes and looked at the fields?

It doesn't stop with exposure. Exposure must lead to compassion. Exposure without compassion is mere sightseeing. Matthew 9:36 says of Jesus, "When he saw the crowds, he had **compassion** on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd." Like most, my heart was broken over these beautiful little Guatemalan sheep without a shepherd. I remember holding those children in my arms and feeling what Jesus felt when he had compassion on the crowds. It's a powerful emotion. Have you allowed yourself to feel what God feels when he sees his creation harassed and helpless? Do you care about them?

But it doesn't stop with compassion. Compassion must lead to action. Compassion without action is fruitless. James 2:15-16 says, "Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, 'Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed,' but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it?" In the same way, if we feel what God feels, yet do nothing about it, we're worthless, lazy servants. The compassion that God gave me in Guatemala turned into a year in the Amazon jungle of Peru. My best friend Britt and I were eager to share Christ with the harassed and helpless and help with their physical needs. Many of you remember our story of the five guys from the Urarinas tribe. They arrived in a village where we were working, and I had the opportunity to ask them if they knew about Jesus. They asked if he lived in the next village. They had no concept of Jesus being the son of God who came to rescue them. Britt and I felt deep compassion in that moment. So did we wish them well and send them on their way to sell their bananas? NO. We invited them to church and shared the gospel with them, and two of them accepted Christ as Savior. But I wondered, how often at home do I wish people well, but not share the gospel?

When I got home from Peru, I knew God was leading me to work with people like the Urarinas guys. I did some reading, and in Central Asia, the people are 99% that way, having no concept of Jesus as their Savior. They are Muslim, believing their good deeds must outweigh their bad to go to heaven, and that Jesus was a mere prophet or good teacher. Well let's play a little Who's who game. I've got some slides from the two summers I spent in central Asia, and we'll do a little comparison between their culture and ours.

They are not that different! But 99% of them don't know Jesus, and there's no churches like First Free to teach them. Are we more deserving of God's love than they are?

What I'll be doing: Studying language, building friendships, and ultimately our hope is to plant churches there.

A lot of people ask me why I'm going so far away to do ministry? Well, there's a story that explains my answer to that question. God protected me on a long, difficult bike ride with my friend Nick. A truck nearly ran me over, and at high speed I had to jump off my bike. Somehow, and this is why I believe in guardian angels, I jumped off my bike into a ditch, landed on my feet running, and without a scratch. God used this friendship time with Nick by giving us meaningful conversation. At one point, as I was sharing the gospel with him, he asked me a question I will never forget: "If your beliefs are true, how come it's taken so long for them to reach my people?"

If your beliefs are true, how come it's taken so long for them to reach my people? How would you answer that question? I don't think we can blame God. I don't think we can say that God doesn't want them to know Him. Of course he does. I think at some level the church as a whole has failed. Often people like me, in my exact position with the same compassion, have been called to a ministry with these Muslims or similar Muslims or Guatemalan kids, but we have chickened out when the time comes for action. Why do we chicken out? Because the risks are too big and the fears seem overwhelming. I was so close to chickening out due to the fears. How will I find a wife? What about money? Family and friends back home? Language? What if I fail out there or get sick? What if they kill me or kick me out? These questions loom large in my mind and in the mind of many others before me, and even in some minds at this very second in this room. When I ask you in a few minutes how you could take some risks, many of you will raise these exact questions, use them as excuses, and chicken out. I suspect that these excuses are at least part of the reason why the gospel has not reached Nick's people, why little girls are solid into prostitution in Thailand, why kids are working in dumps in Guatemala, and why people are dying of treatable diseases in Africa.

I suspect that fear causes an inward focus, which leads us deeper into our comfort zone, which then causes more fear. It's a cycle. All those fears I just mentioned focus on me, and when the focus is inward on me, fear builds. The American church as a whole has become too inward focused, and I think it is because we are working by our strength, which makes us afraid of what is on the outside. We fear that if we seek the lost the way Jesus did, our church might look different. We might not be as comfortable. Our hands

might get dirty in the mess of problems that exist in the neighborhoods and world around us. We might even get called to a far away country. The result of this fear is sitting in a comfort zone with more of an inward focus that ignores Christ's call to the harvest fields that are ready to be reaped! As we clench in more, the world gets bigger and bigger and scarier and scarier, and suddenly we've forgotten that that scary, messy, dirty world is exactly what Jesus came to save us from.

So then, how do we live by faith, like the heroes in Hebrews 11? It's interesting: this chapter includes people who did huge things. Crossing the Red Sea! Raising of the dead! Having a child at age 90! It's easy to trust God with things like that, because there is simply no possible way that we ourselves can make things like that happen. In the same way, we understand that there is no possible way that we can get to heaven without the supernatural intervention of God. So we easily trust him for that! But, in the same passage, there are heroes of faith who did very regular things, without supernatural intervention. For example, Abel simply brought his normal offering to God. Rahab, in just one incident, gave lodging to some Israelite spies. Moses made a decision to not be considered the son of Pharaoh's daughter and reject the treasures of Egypt. There is no supernatural intervention in these decisions of faith: they are regular decisions that are similar to the decisions we make on a daily basis. Will we bring our best offering to Christ like Abel did? Will we take a risk the way Rahab did, going against what everyone in her culture would have said? Will we reject the treasures of America in favor of devotion to God, like Moses did in Egypt?

Just as God made promises to the faith heroes of Hebrews 11, He has also made us a great promise in Ephesians 2:10: "For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do." That's God's promise for every Christian, that He has good works prepared for us to do. Are we doing them? Are we trusting this promise? Check out this quote from William Carey, a missionary to India in the 1800s: "Attempt great things for God. Expect great things from God." My brothers and sisters, that's faith. The answer to all these fears is GOD. When we focus on God, we are not afraid anymore. We're not looking inward! And we don't need to stay in our comfort zones! When we believe God has great plans for our lives, we can take the risky leap forward to do them, and expect God to do great things, and He does! We don't, but He does!

What would our names look like in Hebrews 11? Wichitans and First Free people can easily make the cut. Here's an example: By faith, a member of the Moriah class worked with the AWANA kids year after year after year. He didn't know he'd have an impact on a little 4th grader named Clyde. He didn't know how much Clyde respected him. He didn't know he'd have an impact on a kid that would end up attempting great things for God in the Muslim world, but he trusted in God's promise, and God did great things through his service. Thank you Harry. By faith, certain men and women volunteered with the Frontline for five, ten, even twenty years. These people never knew how valuable those goofy hang out times and late night conversations would be. They rarely received thank you notes from the students, but they kept serving. By faith, they trusted

God had good works for them to do in the Frontline, and they affected many young lives, including my own. Thank you Terry, thank you Ken & Laura, thank you Dale & Lisa.

Here is my question for you: are you living by faith or fear? Is your faith in the biggest God big enough to take a big risk? I urge you to reflect first if you are in the situation He wants you in. Consider that maybe, maybe God has plans for you to leave your country or neighborhood, your people, and go somewhere else, like Abraham did. If once you've considered that, you have confidence that God wants you right here, then I urge you to consider how you can act in faith right here. Do you believe God has good works for you, both in the church AND in the surrounding world? If we believe that, then why are our lives more focused on our comfort and entertainment than on those works God has promised? Hebrews 11 faith is actively sacrificing our comfort and entertainment to make ourselves available for God's work. Do you have the big faith to make the sacrifice?

We can only have big faith because of one reason: we have the biggest God! Our God is so good and so big, that when He leads us to take risks, like me going to Asia or you inviting neighbors over for dinner, He makes good out of it! Even when things go wrong, He makes good out of it. Even if I die in Asia, He'll make good out of it. He has planned to use us to tell his good news and help others. I urge you then to get out of your comfort zone, take the big risk with an even bigger faith, and watch the Biggest God use it for good.