

Have you ever felt challenged beyond your abilities?

There was once an elderly woman and husband who didn't always get along. Somehow they had managed to live together well enough to make it to old age. But at times it was difficult.

They had started going to each other's doctors appointments so they could have an extra ear hear what was happening. On one occasion, the elderly man wasn't doing too well, so they took him to the doctor for tests. The doctor became quite concerned by what the tests were revealing and he took the wife aside to tell her the news.

He said, "Your husband isn't doing well. He is about to die unless you take important measures. Are you willing to do it?"

"What are they?" she said.

He replied, "Here is what you need to do. Every morning, make sure he gets a good healthy breakfast. Have him come home for lunch each day so you can feed him a well balanced meal. Make sure you feed him a good dinner each night. Also, make sure you take care of all of the dishes. Don't burden him with any household chores either, make sure you do all of the work around the house. Unless you wait on him hand and foot, he is going to die."

On the way home, the husband asked his wife what the doctor said. She looked at him and said, "Well, you're going to die."

Here is a woman who was challenged and she didn't want to rise to the occasion. She didn't want to do what was needed. How about you? Have you ever felt challenged beyond your abilities?

I have. I suspect you have as well. Thank God, we are not alone. Because our scriptures are filled with stories about people who have faced life's challenges and found ways to respond to them. In our scripture for today, the Hebrew people are facing a challenge. It is a challenge that has the capacity to derail them from following God. It is a challenge that could break them up. It is a challenge that could destroy them, as a people.

They are in the wilderness. God has led them out of Egypt and helped them to face challenges already. In our story for today, they are out of water. They are thirsty. They are scared. They don't know what to do. So they complain and turn against each other.

When faced with challenges, it is easy to lose sight of what is important. When faced with challenges it is easy to complain and turn on those closest to you. When faced with challenges it is easy to want to give up, hoping the difficulties will eventually go away.

When you are faced with challenges, what do you do? How do you respond?

The tragedy that has occurred in my life, with the death of my daughter Whitney and the incarceration of my son Isaac for committing this crime has been an immense challenge for our family personally and for us as a faith community. Personally, our family is facing this challenge the best we can, by focusing on the tasks of saying goodbye, finding our way through the legal system and connecting up with counselors to deal with our hurt, grief and anger.

As a church, this tragedy in the last month has caused us to stop our sermon series. You have surrounded our family with love, concern and care. Tasks and plans have been temporarily put on hold, as you have helped us to deal with this tragedy. So far, we have responded to this challenge appropriately. What do we do next?

In our scripture, Moses gathered up the complaints of the people, and yes, he was frustrated. But then he turned to God and asked for help. And God provided. **I believe Moses gives us a model for how we can find our way into the future of the wilderness challenges that we are in.**

What are the next steps? First of all, it is in placing God at the center of our lives.

For our family, the next steps include continuing on the path that we are on to deal honestly with the pain, the grief and the anger we are facing. I want to tell you that we continue love Isaac and want to help him through the legal challenges that he will face, striving for honesty and justice.

As a family we are returning to work and school. Because these tasks actually help us experience healing. *For me, as your pastor, one of the steps to my healing is to see you, as members of the church, take steps to grow and deepen your relationship with God.*

As a church, we have some steps to take next as well. While I hope you will continue to support me, my family, and our church staff deal with our pain. I certainly don't want our pain to become the main task and mission of our church. I hope you can be sensitive to us in our hurt. **But let's not use this tragedy as an excuse to stop connecting with God and growing in faith yourself.**

As a church, we need to continue to be the church, focused on mission. Focused on reaching out to invite others to come and share in the love of God and the grace of God. Focusing on helping each one of us here to connect with God and grow in faith.

If I could, I would love to sit down and visit with each one of you and ask four sets of questions. The first set is, what are you doing to connect with God on a daily basis? Are you taking time for prayer, for reading scripture, for journaling? Are you attending to your personal life of devotion so you can deepen your relationship with God?

The second set is, what are your plans for study and learning and growth in faith? As fall approaches, there are many opportunities in the life of our church for taking part in Bible studies and small groups. What are you going to do to help you connect with God and expand your own faith through group study and participating in a small group? Because now is the time to begin signing up.

The third set of questions is, what are you doing, to nurture your faith? Are you committed to regular public worship as a way to help you remember how much God loves you?

The fourth set of questions I would ask is, what are you doing to put your faith into action? Are you involved in one of the teaching ministries of the church? Are you interested in enhancing our worship through one of our

many music ministries? Are you willing to become involved in local missions, sharing the love and grace of God with others in need?

This passage of scripture reminds me, that when the challenges of life arise and I am tempted to become undone by my fears, that God is actually there to provide for us. I can count on God. So can you.

I want to close today by sharing a story with you. Helen Montone and her husband wanted their son to know that he had been adopted. So from the time he was very young, they explained it to him in a way he could understand.

Helen would say, "I was told that I could not have a baby in my belly and Jesus knew this. Jesus also knew that there was a lady who had a baby in her belly, but she could not be a mommy. From heaven, Jesus saw this baby on the day he was born. Remember we wanted to be a mommy and daddy and the lady could not be a mommy, and that was when Jesus decided that the baby (who was you) belonged to us. That's how we became a family."

One day, on their way home from nursery school, her son asked her if he had been born in Jesus' belly. Helen explained that he was not and once again explained how they became a family. After driving a while in silence, he said, "Oh, no. Now I remember. I wasn't born in Jesus' belly. I was born in his eyes!"

I love that story. It helps me to remember, like this story from the wilderness, that when I find myself facing challenges in the wilderness, that God sees us. That God cares about us. That God wants to provide for us. That we are born in God's eyes, we have value.

I need to remember this. Do you? My hope is that each one of us will remember to turn to God, to be active in growing in our faith, even when the challenges of life build. May God help us connect with God and grow in faith.

Amen