

## “Thanksgiving for the Stress”

1 Samuel 30:1-6

Sermon by Jan Edmiston

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Back in 1984, when Georgetown University was preparing to play Houston in the NCAA basketball finals, Georgetown’s coach John Thompson, was being interviewed at a press conference about the madness surrounding the whole Final Four drama. “How is your team holding up against all the stress?” Thompson was asked by one reporter.

“The stress?” Thompson repeated. “You want to know about the stress?” He took a long, slow sip from his glass of water and the reporters leaned in to hear all the gripping details that Fans Everywhere Would Want To Know.

“You want to know about stress?” Thompson asked. “Unemployed migrant workers, now *they* have stress. Inner-city school teachers, parents who can’t feed their children – *those people* know something about stress. We’re just here to play basketball.”

Of course, there are all kinds of stress. Trying to compare the stress of people who just lost their homes in the Gulf States or their children in the recent earthquake in Asia or their entire family tree in Rwanda with our stress might seem ridiculous. But we all have it: stress.

It might be as simple as racing against a deadline for a project or as overwhelming as losing your job while going through a divorce while your sister is dying of cancer. But everybody has stress.

On this Veterans’ Day weekend, we remember especially soldiers who face a stress that most of us cannot imagine. They venture into Iraqi homes not knowing whether or not the sudden move in the corner is an insurgent ready to activate a bomb or a child looking for a toy.

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As people of faith – or people *trying* to have faith – there is a different way to deal with life’s stress.

We all know the ways that most of the world deal with stress. Some people drink. Some shop. Some eat too many donuts. Some pop pills. But **as people of faith, we are told there is a better way.**

You’ve heard all the clichés: “Let go and let God.” “Take it to the LORD in prayer.” Some people of faith say that they simply don’t experience stress because God is so good and to say we are overwhelmed somehow implies that God is not good, that God is not watching out for us. Some say that the truly faithful never have stress.

That's just not true.

Sometimes the stress is *the very thing* that brings us close to God.

Sometimes, it's only when life is falling apart, and we can't sleep, and we don't know how we are ever going to get out from under the enormous burden we are trying to carry . . . when we realize we need a strength beyond our own.

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The Bible is filled some very faithful people enduring enormous stress. Imagine:

- You grow up in a big family but in a fit of sibling rivalry, your older brothers strip you of your clothes, toss you in a pit, and leave you there without any water. And then the next day, realizing they could actually make *money* off of you, they go back to the pit, pull you up, and sell you to slave traders.<sup>1</sup>

*OR*

- You've given birth to a baby boy, but you are living in a time and place where the king's henchmen are taking baby boys like yours and drowning them in the river. And so you hide your child hoping against hope that a kind person will find your baby and keep him safe.<sup>2</sup>

*OR* – in what might be the ultimate in a single stressful day at least from the Old Testament . . .

- You lose all ten of your beautiful children in a freak accident, and on the same day your cattle and donkeys are stolen by nomads, your servants are murdered, and in what can only be described as an act of God your sheep burn up in a fire. And then the next day, you are inexplicably afflicted with sores covering every inch of your body.<sup>3</sup>

We are talking stress. *Our* stresses are often rather petty compared to what we find in scripture. Nevertheless, they can teach us something about what to do when life becomes unbearable.

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Look at David. He led a charmed life in many ways. But his life was not without a measure of stress. This is what happened to him:

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<sup>1</sup> The story of Joseph, son of Jacob – Genesis 37:18-28

<sup>2</sup> The story of Moses' mother – Exodus 1:22 – 2:4

<sup>3</sup> The story of Job – Job 1:13 – 2:8

David had been hiding from King Saul who wanted to kill him. Saul had once loved David and his music and his talents in battle, but Saul was losing his mind quite literally. And so he was hunting David like a dog to kill him.

And David was so desperate to escape from Saul that he was hiding out among his sworn enemies – the Philistines. (You might remember that David killed the Philistine Goliath in a memorable battle involving a slingshot.) David figured that Saul would never search for him among the Philistines, especially in Goliath’s hometown of Gath.

And David, being the charming soldier he was, completely charmed the King of the Philistines to the point that the Philistine king granted David a Philistine town where he and his men could live. The town was called Ziklag.<sup>4</sup> David and his men and their wives and their children all settled in Ziklag, living among the Philistines and pretending to be on their side in battles against the Hebrews.

But the Philistine lords and commanders did not trust David. When David and his men offered to help them fight in Jezreel, they were rejected and sent back to Ziklag. And when David and his men returned to Ziklag, they were staggered to find that *another* enemy – the Amalekites – had burned Ziklag to the ground. They had taken all the women and children – “both great and small”, which means that everyone was impacted: rich, poor, old, young. All the women and children had been taken, including David’s two wives. And after wailing until there were no tears left, the men turned on David and threatened to stone him to death.

**It was a stressful day.** His own king wanted him dead. The Philistines didn’t trust him (and probably wanted him dead because of the bad blood over Goliath.) The Amalekites had burned their homes and their property and had taken the women and children. And now *his own army* was turning on him.

And so what did David do? There were several options. He could have given up and fallen on his own sword. (which was exactly what Saul would do in the next chapter.) David could have procured more spears, created new allegiances, abandoned his troops and sought new troops. But before David made any decisions at all, this is what he did:

***David strengthened himself in the LORD his God.***

What does that look like, exactly, “strengthening oneself in the Lord”?

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One of the benefits of modern war – or post-modern war – is that soldiers today have access to computers and can send news home with the touch of a finger. OR, they can send news to every other computer on the planet in the form of web logs – blogs.

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<sup>4</sup> 1 Samuel 27:6

There are blogs written by every kind of soldier these days – angry soldiers, bitter soldiers, charged-up soldiers, exuberant soldiers. I've been reading some of them, looking for faithful soldiers – soldiers who are trying to get through this war by strengthening themselves in the LORD.

And I found one that seems to make this connection. This blog was written on May 4 of this year by Zachary Scott-Singley, a sergeant in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Division in Iraq:

### **IT WAS STILL DARK...**

I got dressed in that darkness. When I was ready I grabbed an MRE (meal ready to eat) and got in the truck. I was going to go line the truck up in preparation for the raid we were about to go on. The targets were three houses where RPG attacks had come from a few days prior. Sitting there in that darkness listening to the briefing on how we were to execute the mission, I let my mind wander from the briefing and said a prayer. "Just one more day God, let me live one more day and we will go from there..." It was the same prayer I said every day because every day I did the same thing. I left the base. With a small team I would go out each day on different missions. I was their translator.<sup>5</sup>

Here is a soldier who knows that – at any moment – he could die. His stress levels are at a continuous high. But he is trying to focus on a power stronger than his gun, wiser than his commanding officer, and more loving than even his family back home. And so he prays.

Prayers, of course, are not magic. There is no special formula that guarantees that if we pray a certain way, if we recite a certain verse, if we carry a certain cross with us then we will not be touched by enemy fire. Just look at Jesus.

With all due respect to David, with all due respect to Job (the man who lost all of his ten children in a single day) Jesus experienced more stress than we will ever know. Abandonment. Betrayal. Unjust accusations. Humiliation. Torture.

He prayed to God to release him from this destiny – *if in any way possible* – but still he died on that cross.

And he was God's son. You'd think that if anyone had God's ear, it was Jesus.

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<sup>5</sup><http://www.misoldierthoughts.blogspot.com/>

But there was something that perhaps even Jesus didn't yet know on his way to that cross. It made no sense – Jesus dying like that. At least it made no sense at the time. But looking back, from this side of the cross, we can see God's plan a bit clearer. A plan that – while still mysterious to us – shows us that something extraordinary had to happen for people to believe. And the stress was not the final word. Even in Jesus' mortal stress, even when none of it made sense, even when it looked like even God had abandoned him, Jesus still called God's name. *That is the prayer of a faithful person.*

God used that time, that stress for something that would ultimately bring good. There could be no resurrection, there would be no church, without that death on the cross.

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So what does it look like to “strengthen yourself in the LORD”? Essentially, it seems to mean that we seek something noble, something good that might come out of whatever it is we are enduring.

This is how David did it.

David had with him what sounds like an ancient Ouiji Board or Magic Eight Ball. It was the priest's “ephod.”<sup>6</sup> Scholars believe it was more like a holy garment that the priest wore.

David consulted the ephod and asked, “Shall I pursue this band?” And somehow the ephod helped David receive the message, “Yes.”

Now, I have to be honest with you. This sounds a little shaky to me. King Saul got into trouble by consulting a fortune teller for military strategic advice.<sup>7</sup> But for some reason, it was okay for David. Did David merely have a gut feeling that he knew what God's will for him was? Or was David doing what he wanted to do in the first place? (But that's another sermon.)

David and 600 of his finest set off to find the Amalekites who had burned their town and taken their loved ones, but by the time they reached the Wadi Besor – a valley in a desert – two hundred of the soldiers were too exhausted to go any further.

Four hundred men continued with David across the open land when they met an Egyptian walking by himself. The Egyptian had been a servant to the Amalekites but he had been cast aside because of illness. David and his men fed him and nursed him, and the Egyptian led them to the Amalekite raiders.

And then, in a battle that would have made the evening news, David attacked at twilight in a counter-raid that lasted about 24 hours. While many of the Amalekites

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<sup>6</sup> 1 Samuel 30:7

<sup>7</sup> 1 Samuel 28:7-25

escaped, David and his men safely recovered all the women and children, and all their spoils including cattle, and even more than they had lost back at Ziklag.

*So what difference did David's faith make?* He was victorious this time. Maybe next time he wouldn't be. But David's faith was about more than winning and losing battles. David's faith produced results – “fruits” if you will. **David** was different because of his faith.

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Scripture goes on to share the violent, despicable details of war: how the Philistines mutilated Saul's body upon finding it on Mount Gilboa. They beheaded his body. They stripped him of his armor and placed it in the temple of one of the Philistine's goddesses. They strapped his headless body to the town wall.<sup>8</sup>

We hear of other terrible tales of war<sup>9</sup> in this book, but the story of David goes on to tell how David did not do this sort of thing. He was God's servant even before he was Saul's servant. He not only treated his own men fairly<sup>10</sup>, but he treated his enemies fairly too – at least when he was being most faithful to God. He knew, by God's grace, that there was a better way to live.

People with faith – or people who are *trying* to have faith – recognize that stress is a part of life, but that we can be strengthened in the LORD. And that strength becomes obvious to the people around us because we are different from others. Our faith makes us different.

This is why we don't torture those we imprison. This is why we pray even for our enemies. This is why we don't abuse our minds or our souls when life gets tough. This is why we treat the human body with respect, even when it betrays us. This is why we turn to *others* enduring stress and try to alleviate their pain.

And this is why we can even be thankful for our stress because sometimes it was the very thing that moves us closer to God. When we have nobody to turn to, we can still turn to God. Jesus taught us that even when it looks like God has turned against us, we must still call God's name.

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<sup>8</sup> 1 Samuel 31:1-10

<sup>9</sup> Saul's remains were retrieved by “the valiant men” of Jabesh-gilead who traveled all night just to take down Saul's body and the bodies of his three sons who had been killed. They burned them respectfully (which was not Hebrew tradition, but done perhaps to prevent any further desecration) and they buried Saul's bones in Jabesh and fasted for seven days in respect to him. Saul had rescued Jabesh-gilead at the beginning of his reign as king when the Ammonites had threatened to attack them. The Ammonite king had given them two options: prepare for a brutal attack OR have the right eyes of all soldiers poked out so that they could not see to fight in the future. Before the men of Jabesh-gilead made their decision, Saul's men attacked the Ammonites and saved the people of Jabesh-gilead. See 1 Samuel 10:27b – 11:15.

<sup>10</sup> See 1 Samuel 21-31.

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If you continue to read the May 4<sup>th</sup> blog by Sgt. Scott-Singley, it becomes clear that he would live through the day, but lives would be changed forever. An Iraqi child was killed that day, accidentally. An American soldier's soul would be wounded forever. A family might become so bitter that they join the insurgents and attack the very people who came to liberate them. Sgt. Scott-Singley admits that he would probably want to kill the people who killed his son, if the same thing happened to his family. But he hoped that God would be merciful and help him, and bring peace.

There was a gripping, astonishing story in yesterday's newspaper about another child who was killed accidentally in war – a Palestinian child shot by Israeli troops. This is the kind of tragedy of war that fuels terrorism every day. But this one family decided to react not in violence, but in faith.

They specifically requested that their son's organs would be transplanted into the bodies of sick Israeli children. And so the heart of Ahmed Khatib was transplanted into an Israeli 12-year old, and his lungs were transplanted into an Israeli 14 yr-old, and his liver was transplanted into a 7 month old Israeli girl. A boy and a 58 year old woman received Ahmed's kidneys. This family had no reason to do this except faith. Their family has been living in a refugee camp since the 1940s. They've watched neighbors and friends die at the hands of the ones they call their "occupiers." But they saw this ultimate stress – the loss of a child – as an opportunity to convey their faith in a God who wants peace. "I don't have much to offer," Ahmed's father said. "This is what I had."<sup>11</sup>

This is another fruit that grows from enduring stress in faith. We find ourselves thankful, in spite of our losses to the point that we want to give as generously as we can to honor the One who has blessed us.

This is the week that members and friends of this congregation received letters asking us to make our financial pledges for 2006 to provide the basic tools which allow us to fund ministry through this congregation to the community and beyond. Will our pledges imply that our blessings have been minimal? Or will our pledges be an honest reflection of how much we have been blessed by God?

Even in our stresses, we have much to be grateful for. **If nothing else, those stresses have reminded us to come closer to God.**

We close this morning with an old favorite hymn – *Onward Christian Soldiers* and it was chosen with a bit of trepidation because it is easily misunderstood. This song is not a Crusader Hymn. It is not about political war. In fact, it was written as a

<sup>11</sup> Hoag, Rachel "Organs of Slain Palestinian Boy Donated", The Washington Post, November 7, 2005. See:

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wpdyn/content/article/2005/11/07/AR2005110700238.html>

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/11/11/AR2005111101624.html>

graduation march, which is believable since the beat makes most of us want to march as we sing it. The theology of this sermon is pretty good. Look at the second verse:

*We are not divided, all one body we,  
one in hope and doctrine, one in charity.*

The point of this hymn is to march in strength into the world as a different people, as Christ's people. Through the Church of Jesus Christ we can become a faithful people who are strong against evil. It is with this spirit that we sing today.