Introducing the word “courage” as our focus for this year, I had to think of the cowardly lion in Wizard of Oz. He, of all characters, was lacking courage! He complains, in poetic form, to Dorothy, Tin Man, and Scarecrow, “What makes a King out of a slave? Courage! What makes the dawn come up like thunder? Courage! What have they got that I ain’t got? Courage! (1)

Our OT reading is a familiar story. The Children of Israel, after 40 years of wandering in the desert, are ready to enter the Promised Land. Moses, their fearless leader, has died, and God has designated Joshua to take his place. But to get full benefit from this story, we need to rewind those 40 years to the Jews’ exodus from Egypt. With divine signs and wonders, Moses has led the Israelites across the Red Sea with their sights set on Canaan. Before they enter, however, God tells Moses to send in twelve men as spies, one from each tribe, to see what this new land is like. (Numbers 13 & 14) There are several things Moses tells them to put on their checklist: 1. People – many or few? Big or little? 2. Type of towns – open or walled in? 3. Soil – fertile or poor? Bring back some fruit & veggie samples. So the spies sneak into Canaan and check it out for 40 days. Mention is made of three samples they bring back – pomegranates, figs, but it is the grapes that astound the crowd - a single cluster so big it takes 2 guys to carry it! Everyone assembles to hear the spies’ report. First they hold up the fruit samples and everyone cheers. Then a couple of them speak at one, “As you can see, it’s a rich and fertile land. But there’s one big problem – the people. They live in cities with huge walls, and they are all giants. Shaquille O’Neal would look like Tiny Tim next to them! Walking beside them we felt like grasshoppers.” Then one spy named Caleb steps up to the mic, holds out his arms for silence, and says, “Wait a minute. We should go in and take possession of this land. I know we can do it.” The first reporter turns to the group of 12 and asks for a show of hands, “How many think we can do it?” Two hands – Joshua and Caleb. “And how many say ‘no’”? Ten hands go up. And the crowd, as is often the case, follows the majority. They begin wailing loudly and complaining to Moses, “Why did you bring us out here in the desert, only to die…” Then to themselves, “Let’s choose another leader to take us back to Egypt.” Joshua and Caleb try to intervene with words of encouragement and counsel, “If the Lord is pleased with us, he will lead us into that land….only don’t rebel against the Lord.” Which only angers the crowd even more, to the verge of stoning them.

Now back to our text. It’s interesting to note the self-fulfilling words of the crowd about dying in the desert. Because of their disbelief, every single person who escaped slavery in Egypt has now died in the wilderness over the past 40 years…everyone, that is, except Joshua and Caleb. Because of their faith and courage, they are going to enter the Promised Land along with the new generation. As the new leader, Joshua needs a lot of encouragement. God says (V. 6) “Be strong and courageous.” We hear the same thing in the next verse, with one extra word, “Be strong and very courageous.” And once more, v. 9. NIV translates it, “Have I not commanded you?” “Yes,” I suppose Joshua is thinking, “I’ve heard it twice now.” But God gives the command yet a third time, “Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or discouraged.” And the basis on which courage is built? “For the Lord your God is with you wherever you go.”
This is our theme verse for 2016. Joshua 1:9. We’ve put it on the new bookmark. And on the new banner Tim and Gayle made, hanging behind you. In a few weeks, we’ll all have this in our memory banks. Let’s read it together: “This is my command—be strong and courageous! Do not be afraid or discouraged. For the LORD your God is with you wherever you go.”

Now a brief look at our NT scripture. Paul is writing from a cold, dark dungeon to the young leader Timothy. Feeling quite alone, he has a premonition that his death is near at hand. Like a father to Timothy, he wishes he could see him one more. He is concerned about the future of the church under the present persecution by Emperor Nero. In this second letter, Paul encourages Timothy to continue his leadership ministry and faithfully guard the gospel, even though suffering might be in store. Paul refers to Timothy’s upbringing, noting the “genuine faith” of his grandmother and mother. His command: “fan into flames the spiritual gift God gave you.” (Sounds like my SS class right now….using our gifts to serve others.) V. 7, then, gives us a promise that can be applied in any situation that requires courage: “For God has not given us a spirit of fear and timidity, but of power, love, and self-discipline.” When fears begin to attack, we can say, “I know this spirit of fear is not from God. In its place, God has promised me strength, love, and self-control” (Another excellent memory verse for this year- 2 Tim.1:7)

Some of you might be wondering about the word “follower” in our Theme. After all, today’s two examples, Joshua and Timothy, were both leaders. Wouldn’t it make more sense to say “Becoming Courageous Leaders”? It doesn’t take much courage to be a follower. Or does it? Consider that both Joshua and Timothy had significant mentors, Moses and Paul, respectively, to follow and learn from. Illustrating this important truth: before you can be a good leader you need to become a good follower. And I think it is understood that we might add two words to our theme and say, “Becoming Courageous Followers of Jesus.” Take a closer look at our banner. It is the storm, the dark clouds and lightning, that strikes you first. But at bottom center is a path, heading directly into the storm. Tim, Gayle, and I talked about putting a figure of Jesus at the end of the path, but decided not to. We can’t see him. We are called to walk courageously into the storm by faith alone, banking on Jesus’ promise to be with us “wherever we go.”

So as we picture ourselves, like the Israelites, standing on the mountaintop and looking over into the “promised land” of a new year, what are some of the challenges we face in entering that rich and fertile land? Let’s return to our text in Joshua, to pick up something important that I didn’t mention yet. Note God’s words in v. 7&8 - “Be careful to obey all the instructions Moses gave you. Don’t deviate from them, to the right or to the left…then you will be successful…” Study this Book of Instruction continually. Meditate on it day and night so you’ll be sure to obey everything….only then will you succeed in all you do.” Paul’s message to Timothy in his second letter was similar. “What you heard from me, keep as the pattern of sound teaching…” (1:13) “Do your best to present yourself to God as …a workman who doesn’t need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth.” (2:15) One of the biggest challenges we face, in a culture where relativism prevails, is to continue to take God’s Word seriously. It’s a trustworthy guide for daily living, regardless of the latest surveys or opinion polls. It has withstood the test of time, in spite of intense opposition in many different cultural and political settings around the world. A second challenge is similar: to be courageous enough, like Joshua and Caleb, to continue to speak the truth (in love, of course), even if it is the minority voice. After all, it’s a long-standing tradition among God’s people. The Early
Church, though it grew rapidly, was still in the minority, until Constantine made it the official religion of his empire. And again in the 1500’s, a few people, negatively labeled “Anabaptists”, stood up to the powerful State Church and called for radical obedience to Jesus and his upside-down Kingdom. Intense persecution only seemed to make this growing minority more courageous.

In today’s Newsletter, I’ve mentioned a few other challenges that call for courageous living, particularly as it relates to the goals we’ve set as a church for 2016. Check it out.

I was struck in a new way this week with the enigma of our OT story. God’s people had clear evidence of a rich and fruitful land waiting for them across the Jordan River. But in order to enter, they had to face their fears of the “giants” living there. We face a similar challenge as 2016 begins. There’s a tangible sense of uncertainty and fear about what this year might bring. Captured well in this Ziggy cartoon on Dec. 31. He’s leaning heavily against a door marked “2016” and says, “You do NOT want to go in there!” But we don’t have a choice. The door has opened. And as we walk through this door, we have two options. To focus our attention, like the 10 spies, on the giants, and conclude, “We can’t take them on.” Or, like Joshua and Caleb, to look at the tasty and bountiful fruit and courageously declare, “We can do it. With the power, love and self-discipline that God supplies, we can bring those giants down and enjoy the blessings that God has for us.”

Come with me now to the “Reflection” part of our Sermon Notes. First question: What are the personal “giants” you are facing this year that require courage? (pause) My giants might look different than yours. But for all of us here, God’s message is the same: “Be strong and courageous! Do not be afraid or discouraged.” Every person who faces his/her personal giants with courage will make our church that much stronger. The second question focuses on the “rich and fertile land” in front of us. What blessings do you see, by faith, that can be ours as a congregation in 2016? (Maybe someone will have a “word” for us during open mic time.) (pause) And lastly, what obstacles are in our way, as a church family, that could keep us from receiving God’s blessings? (pause)

A final challenge: Let’s not wander in the wilderness this year because of our fears! Let’s face our giants with courage, confident that “God will be with us wherever we go.”

Sources: