



*Faith*  
**AND FILM**

# THE WAY WAY BACK

**EXPLORE IN WORSHIP: SUNDAY, JUNE 29th | PREACHED BY REV. DR. DANIEL KANTER**

Last week in the face of bombings in Iran, retaliations, and the very real possibility that the President of the United States couldn't care less about the laws governing our country in wartime, a satirical media outlet, The Onion, took out a full page ad in the New York Times with the headline, Congress, Now More than Ever, Our Nation Needs Your Cowardice. And the journalist, Marissa Kabas of the Handbasket wrote this as her commentary: "Our republic is a birthright, an exceedingly rare treasure passed down from generation to generation of Americans. It was gained through the hard years of bloody resistance and can too easily be lost. Our founding fathers and their abundant wisdom understood that all it would take was men and women of little courage sitting in the corridors of power and taking zero actions as precious inheritance was stripped away, and that is where we have finally arrived."

And so friends at every turn of the new cycle, every moment we feel the trouble of these times, I know I do, we are right now on the precipice of a bill that will give the rich tax cuts while gutting Medicaid and veteran services and food stamps and more. Our governor of Texas has vetoed a bill that would have provided summer food assistance to low income children. Pride parades are being visited by men en masse with Confederate flags and Nazi flags, and all the news is bad. And in this chaos it is easy to feel small and insignificant and importantly to allow fear to creep in. It has for me.

We all know something about this, I think. No matter who you are, you feel something about what is going on. And no matter who you are, you have never lived without knowing something about fear, even if you won't admit it. And no matter who you are, you either over or underestimate your courage. In times like these, which seem unprecedented but really aren't, what I do is take my cues from people who have changed things to help me with balancing fear and courage. A few years ago, a story of a

bronze statue caught my attention. It was unveiled in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. In some ways it was a counter-protest to the presence of statues commemorating the Confederate army. If you remember a few years ago, during a time when statues of Robert E. Lee were coming down, some were being protected and fights over monuments, especially related to the Civil War were hot.

Side note, Texas and its State House never addressed the many Confederate monuments on its property. Whether you believe they should stay or not, you probably believe they should be debated and they weren't. But in Pennsylvania, one statue was erected rather than torn down. That was for a man named Thaddeus Stevens. The cool thing about this unassuming statue was that it was made to look as if it was put there after the Civil War, and yet it is only three years old now. Thaddeus Stevens was from Vermont. He moved to Pennsylvania and turned his entire life into a campaign to end slavery.

He was elected as a representative from Gettysburg in the state legislation and then to Congress. He was the key mover of the 13th Amendment to the Constitution, which abolished slavery. And importantly for today, the week when the Supreme Court basically made birthright citizenship illegal, he was the father of the 14th Amendment, which required equal treatment under the law and extends civil liberties to the state level and the right of citizenship for anyone born in the US. Some historians suggest that Stevens deserves the title The Great Emancipator as much as Lincoln did. Among other names, he was called The Savior of Public Education in Pennsylvania, The Great Commoner, a great fighter for human freedom and an uncompromising abolitionist. He was also called a radical Republican. Wouldn't it be refreshing to have him back?

He defended runaway slaves as a lawyer. He supported the Underground Railroad. He refused to sign the state constitution because it disenfranchised Black people in America, and he pushed to arm Black soldiers in the Civil War. He pushed Lincoln to emancipation saying, "There could be no victory without equality." This is the 1830s. He was using his money to buy the freedom of enslaved people. His true goal, though was not to end slavery, but actually to equip America with equity among the races. He protested California's discrimination against Chinese immigrants and he argued for the humane treatment of Native Americans, positions unheard of in his day. After the Civil War, Stevens urged the federal government to seize the estates of wealthy former Confederates and use them in part to provide freedom with some small compensation for centuries of forced labor. To those people who had been enslaved, Stevens warned that without economic empowerment, freed men would eventually find themselves at the mercy of their former masters.

He said, "It is impossible that any practical equality of rights can exist where a few thousand men monopolize the whole landed property." Darn, we need Stevens back today. In 1865, he said, "The whole fabric of the southern society must be changed and never can it be done if this opportunity is lost. Without this, the government can never be as it never has been a true republic." Thaddeus Stevens knew without sufficient economic power, civic equity and equality becomes difficult to maintain. Neither a Universalist nor a Unitarian, sorry we can't take him into our own, but a revolutionary, a man of courage called to see no stranger, called to embrace and listen to enemies

and still hold a position on these topics of equity, called to learn and change himself and develop a sense of compassion and courage without fear, the fear of reprisal or attack against his character.

I am sure he was not born into a culture that told him he was doing the right thing on these topics, but he learned an inner strength that made a difference. The creators of the Stevens statue in Gettysburg said they put it there because they wanted to honor his courage. Interestingly, the Stevens statue is not the only one in Gettysburg. If you go there, you will find a statue of four soldiers, clothes torn, charging forward, a Confederate flag in their hands, the monument for the fighters that the Confederacy with the words engraved in a granite block that say, "The promise of their valorous deeds and eternal glory is enshrined in the hearts of men long after their bones are dust."

The Stevens statue is not full of such bluster. It is a statue of a humble man with a cane and a clubbed foot, wind in his coat tails showing him moving forward, but toward a very different goal than the soldiers. One of equity and purpose for all people. One our courageous leaders today should go visit. Courage is the word of the day. If it was Sesame Street, that's what I'd say. After watching the summer fun times coming of age story in our film series this week, the film *The Way Way Back*, a gem of a touching, painful act of growing up, a story with lots of childish acts of humor. The title *The Way Way Back* refers to sitting in the far back of the station wagon looking backwards. Anyone ever did that? I did for sure. But it also is about finding the way back to courage and integrity. I realized this watching it a second time with the group on Wednesday, that it was telling us that we too have courage.

The film is about the courage to get out from under oppressive, dysfunctional families, to find places and people that accept you for who you are and what you bring to life. It is about the courage to try things that might not be so safe but aren't the prescribed and easy way in life. The only quote I want to use from the film is the one that encourages all to see beyond the tightly drawn lines of expectation and the prescribed paths in life said by Owen, a somewhat rebellious mentor to Duncan, a timid teenager coming into his own. Owen says to him, "Don't die wondering." And once Duncan finds some courage through the series of events where he is accepted and loved by people, not his family, he repeats this line back to others, "Don't die wondering," telling us that life isn't worth much if we don't risk being courageous.

Now, courage comes in many forms. Part of it is to know who you are and what is important to you. Part of it is to know when not to remain silent when silence is expected of you. Part of it is to know when to boldly be yourself. Courage, as Anne Sexton says in her poem, is in the small things. "The courage is a small coal that you keep swallowing even when you're enduring great despair or picking the scabs off your heart." We have all been there, pulling ourselves up from being down and starting over, seeing the way fear holds us down and confronting it with whatever we have.

So many of you here are living courageously. I have known you to be courageous parents, LGBT folks, activists, rebels, adventurers and artists. I have known you to be courageous family members when you go to your 4th of July picnic with your friends or family and facing them down when they tell you you are sinners or wrong because your child is trans or because you attend a church like this. I know

you are courageous because many of you have left your childhood faith, left the community that called on you and loved you.

Communities of certainty for one like this that gives you more questions than answers. It wraps you in love and support that you might not have found elsewhere. I know you to be courageous spouses, caring for the dying, mourners, feeling left behind, aging and lonely dealing with ailments you didn't believe you deserved. I know you are courageous because you have come out of closets and claimed your freedom from identities prescribed to you by the majority to live in the minority. I know you are courageous because you have confronted racism, sometimes your own and your complicity with it. And I know you have confronted addiction, addressed them head on with courage and addressed those diagnoses in your life and the suffering that follows.

I know this because I'm your pastor and I've sat with so many of you in my office and heard the stories. But every time I know there is courage because as much as fear can get ahold of us, the courage is always there if we can tap into it. In *The Way Way Back*, there's this teaching that's happening through this quirky, strange film about the way to live in wisdom of being happy, being satisfied, of living fulfilling and meaningful lives, which includes letting go of fear, accepting to live in love and discovering our own unique paths that we faithfully travel.

It shows us how fear freezes and causes us to close down and stop growing and start withering. You can see in the film this 14-year-old pimply boy open up as the film proceeds. Fear and insecurity and the lack of love causes so many adults in this film to be emotionally stunted and compromised and narcissistic and judgmental. And Duncan, the struggling teenager in the film, a film you may never see or maybe didn't see or maybe never will, learns that to live with fear is what erodes his very being, but to live with love is what opens him. He learns that fear freezes and contracts and constricts us. Fear is death, but love is life.

"Are you living or existing?", asks the film. Are you frozen in fear to the extent that you will die wondering, go to the grave with the song still in you or are you daring to truly live, to walk your unique path and to be fearless, be that one of a kind person who you've been created to be? Sam Kean asks similar questions in his book, *Learning to Fly*. He unpacks all this while he's trying to learn the trapeze in his old age. Can you imagine? He says that in adulthood, we fear the loss of life as we know it and the loss of the people we love, but that deep down we also fear change. Deep down, we may also fear being free.

Sometimes it's easier in the closet. Fear of freedom is the one that asks us, please keep entertaining me. Keep filling my time. Keep distracting me so I don't have to be myself or confront myself. The poet, Clare Morris says it this way, "I have known nights when the shell of my heart broke beyond fear, when I died enough to be born. A living wind breathed into me. A world unseen heard vaguely beyond the womb of the known, the unimagined caught me, held me and loved me." She's saying to us that to live is to crack through the fears that bind us, to stand high on that platform like a trapeze artist and be willing to leap off for the bar. To remain alive and vital, Kean says, "We must be able to swing back

and forth between the complexities of who we are and the cherishing of the mystery of our inspired flesh."

Easy to say when the world is simple and harder to say when the world is difficult. But the poet Rilke also says to us, "We have no reason to mistrust our world. For it is not against us. It has its terrors, but they are our terrors. It has its abysses, but those abysses belong to us. There are dangers at hand and we must try to love them." If only we had a world of people who could live up to some of this. I know it's difficult. It is difficult for me. I can hardly do it myself as I hide from the next piece of terrible news in the world. But I also know we can be at least 10% more courageous if we understand that those terrors of the world are our terrors, those abysses are our abysses. That there is always courage like the coal we eat in our mouth, that the next moment we feel fear creeping in is the moment when we have to speak our truth. I see that you can do this often.

Thaddeus Stevens said, "I never fear to express my sentiments. It's not a question with me, a policy, but a question of principle." He also said, "Next time you're at a July 4th picnic and your friend or family member tells you you are a sinner for coming to this church." You tell them, no you're not. That you know who you are, good and loved. Friends to know danger, but not violence, courage, but not conquest, striving for excellence, but not competition, the joy of achievement, but not victory. That might be today's good news in this message of courage for you. Courage is something we need, something we have. Something we have especially when we know we are held by God's love, which holds us in a courage if we trust it, something we can uncover for great and small moments in life. It is what we are called to do. Amen and amen.