



Profiles in Courage: Living and Leading in Dangerous Times

"Na'arah"

Wildwood Mennonite Church // May 17, 2020

Worship Leader: Rick F // Music Leader: Marg E // Sermon: Joe

Welcome to Wildwood

Welcome, everybody, to our ongoing home worship format. I don't know about you, but I have appreciated the ongoing ability to have our services continue, albeit in a different written and virtual format.

As I listen to and read about things going on around me, I realize there are many different reactions to this virus situation. Some of us are worried about getting the virus- will we get sick? Will we even survive? Or maybe we are worried about the economy- will we have a job/ how can I go to school? How can I pay my bills once the government assistance is finished? Others of us may just be bored-cannot go to restaurants, coffee shops, visit friends for a meal, go to the theatre or movies. Or maybe the biggest thing is you cannot go to your children or grandchildren's homes, or maybe you can't visit your parents. Probably each of us can identify with more than one of these situations.

Yet we still gather together. Whoever wrote the Wildwood online welcome on April 26 was 'bang on':

"...here we are, still connected to one another through these words and prayers, still trusting in the same goodness and love of our Creator. No matter where you've been and what you've done this week, no matter your fears and frustrations and hopes or lack thereof, you are welcome in this place of worship and you are not alone."

Music For Meditation // [Hear My Prayer, O Lord](#) // Composed by Purcell, Sung by VOCES8

Call to Worship // [Micah 6:8 from Carol Penner](#)

Our call to worship is from Micah 6:8:

God has told you, O mortal, what is good;
and what does the Lord require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God?

Let's pray:

It is good to be together, God,
in this place, with these people, at this time,
together listening for your voice.

In this hour of worship
tell us about your kingdom of kindness
so that we can seek it.
Show us your justice.
We want to walk with you,
humbly, closely, daily.
Amen.

Song // [One Voice](#) // The Wailin' Jennys

Peace Candle

This morning as we light the Peace Candle, I want us to remember that even in these weird pandemic times, racism is once again becoming obvious.

Witness northern Canada, where inadequate and overcrowded housing, food and water insecurity, and inadequate healthcare has led to outbreaks of the Coronavirus.

Witness the blatant anti Asian sentiment where people are going out of their way to make racist slurs against Asian and specifically Chinese background, and blaming them for the pandemic and telling them to go home, even if they have lived in this country all their lives. Some of these situations have become so violent that the people being blamed fear to go out alone in their own communities.

A quick look through the news reveals this situation is worldwide, not only in Canada.

Prayer: God of all people, we admit we live in a broken world, a world where we find it easy to blame others for our troubles. Fill us with your spirit and help us to know you love all people and so should we. Show us where we need forgiveness and your help to treat others with love.
Amen

Scripture // Matthew 18:1-4

The disciples came up to Jesus with the question, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?"

Jesus called for a little child to come and stand among them. Then Jesus said, "The truth is, unless you change and become like little children, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven. Those who make themselves as humble as this child are the greatest in the kingdom of heaven."

Children's Story // [Click here for video storytime with Linda!](#)

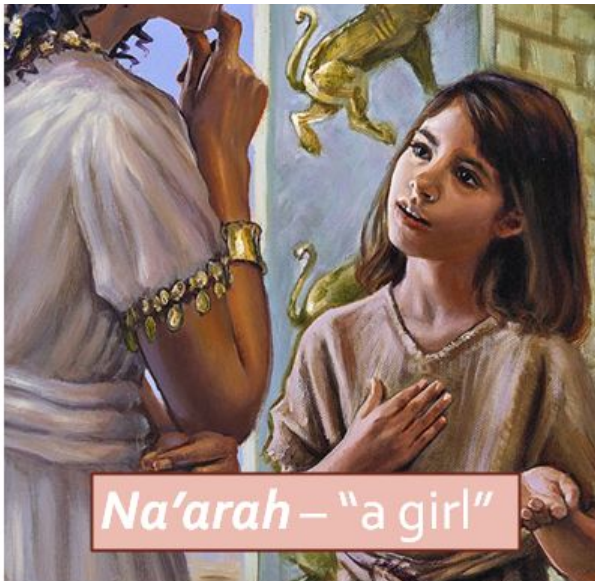
The book is [Pete & Pillar, The Big Rain: A Story of Friendship based on John 15:13](#)
by Jeffery Stoddard.

Sermon // "Faith: Falling or Flying?" // Joe Heikman

(If you'd rather watch than read, [click here for the video version on youtube](#))

She had lost everything. Her family, her homeland, her freedom. Even her name.

The historians who wrote the book of [2 Kings](#) gave her a one-sentence description: "On one of their raids the Arameans captured a young woman from the land of Israel, and she served Na'aman's wife."



Na'arah, that's the Hebrew word for "young woman," so that's what I'm going to call her, "Na'arah." That was all that was left of her identity, a slave girl to the wife of a powerful general.

Na'arah had no people, no future, no power, and yet she forced her way into a biblical speaking part with one thing: faith.

"One day, Na'arah said to her mistress, 'If only Na'aman would see the prophet who is in Samaria [her homeland], he would cure Na'aman's leprosy.'"

Oh yeah, Na'aman had fatal skin disease. This was the commanding general of the army of the nation of Aram. Powerful, disciplined, stellar reputation. His name even means "Pleasant, lovely." It's hard to be humble with that name and that kind of influence.

But Na'aman had leprosy, a deadly and disfiguring skin disease. Leprosy would kill him slowly, and humiliate and isolate him first. There was no cure and so, in spite of all his power, Na'aman was going to be brought down. He had no hope.



That's quite the contrast presented by the storytellers. We have Na'aman, the "lovely" man with power and ego but no hope. And we have Na'arah, the slave girl with nothing *but* hope and faith.

It's not surprising that the writers quickly move on to tell the rest of Na'aman's story. You can read it for yourself in [2 Kings 5](#). The short version is that Na'aman was desperate enough to try Na'arah's suggestion, desperate enough to follow the prophet Elisha's instructions to wash in the Jordan River and be healed. And he *was* healed, and humbled.

That's a story I grew up being amazed at. Today, though, I'm more interested in Na'arah, because to me it's even more amazing than she had hope and faith in her situation.

Again, she had literally everything taken from her. At a young age, Na'arah was captured by an invading army, stolen as plunder from a decimated village. I don't even want to imagine the horrors of that experience. She was carried off to a foreign capital hundreds of miles away, no chance of escape or rescue.

She was made the slave in the house of the leader of the troops that kidnapped her. We don't know exactly what that looked like, ancient practices of slavery varied greatly. But even in the best case scenario, Na'arah had none of the things that we value--no freedom, no security, no agency, no control. What is humanity without those?

In these pandemic days I've been greatly affected by even the partial loss of those things.

So it's amazing to me that, out of that place of total powerlessness, Na'arah has the faith to suggest that her master might want to seek help from her God for his condition.

[insert sarcastic voice] "You know, the same God who let my people be defeated, who let me be kidnapped, the same God who is clearly *not* rescuing me from slavery, yeah, you should definitely ask *that* God for help with your situation!"

But that's what Na'arah says, apparently without a trace of sarcasm.

From all outward appearances, Na'arah has no reason for faith in *anything*. And yet, there it is.

So what's going on?

When I started reading Na'arah's story this week, this quote from Jesus came to mind:



"Faith like a child," that's how the phrase is often said. There are lots of interpretations around what that means to be childlike in our faith. Children are curious, innocent, full of wonder, and quick to trust.

Faith like a child?

naivete // healthy and unhealthy

Naivete is viewed as such a negative in our reason-based world. But in children, naivete is both natural and purposeful. Of course children lack the wisdom of experience and judgment, they're kinda new here!

And that lack of understanding drives them to learn and grow. They want to know *everything*, which is amazing and exhausting.

The trouble with naivete comes when it does not recognize its own lack of knowledge and proceeds as though it knows what it does not. Naivete that ignores facts, rejects self-examination, and is unwilling to learn is unhealthy.

Anyway, when I was looking at Na'arah's story, my first thought was that her faith was naive. Here she is, believing in the healing power of this prophet, Elisha, even though the prophet and his God had done nothing to protect her or fix her situation.

And maybe that's what it was, the kind of blind faith that doesn't make those connections and relies on magical thinking for assurance that everything is going to turn out okay. We don't really know how old Na'arah was, it could be that she was a little kid, where that kind of faith is perfectly natural.

It's odd, though, that her masters would have risked so much to follow up on the faith of a child. I mean, I see a lot of goodness in my kids' belief in Santa, but I still buy a few presents myself just in case the old guy doesn't show up on Christmas Eve! :)

Again, Na'arah is the word for young girl, which is a broad term also used to describe young married women like Ruth and Esther. I think it's most likely that Na'arah was in her mid-to-late teens: young, but in that society fully functional and old enough to know some things. Especially given what she had been through.

So I don't think her story is about naivete or blind faith. There was something about her that made her masters take her faith seriously.

It's worth noting that the actual instruction from Jesus in Matthew 18 is for his followers to "make themselves as *humble* as this child."

Humility is the key to faith, Jesus is saying. All the Mennonites watching this are nodding vigorously...on the inside, of course. Mennonites have a reputation for being humble, a fact that [we are quite proud of](#). :)

It seems to me that there are two layers of humility. The first is about comparison--humility is not thinking of yourself as better than anyone else, putting others ahead of yourself, not taking yourself too seriously, self-deprecation, being polite and deferential. "*Blessed are the meek...*"

I think there's also another level, the humility of self-awareness, of seeing your situation as it truly is, recognizing your own deficiencies. Not in comparison to anyone else, but in general--there is so much that I don't know and don't understand about the world, I have so many physical limitations, there is so much that I can't control.

Faith like a child?

naivete // healthy and unhealthy

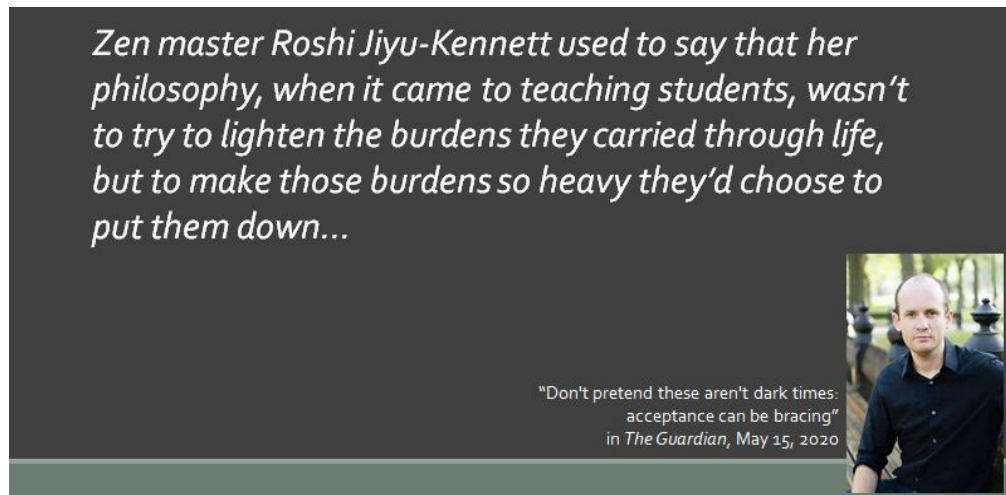
humility // deferential and vulnerable

That's also humility. Recognizing that naivete isn't just for children and *those people* that disagree with me. *Everyone* is woefully naive and idealistic about some things. I'd say that we all know that on a much deeper level now than we did two months ago, hey?

From that place, Jesus said, the place of not knowing, and being aware of our not knowing, the place of vulnerability, that's where faith is really possible.

I think that's the experience of Na'arah. All that she'd been through had stripped away any pretense of control. She knew uncertainty, she knew disappointment, she knew trauma. She was *not* where she wanted to be, and yet, somehow, she found something meaningful about her life. Not on the other side of the suffering, but in the middle of it, there was purpose, faith and hope.

I read an article this week [from columnist Oliver Burkeman in *The Guardian*](#). He writes this:



I had a friend a long time ago whose family was going through some really difficult things. And one family member just refused to let anyone in help them, just kept his head down and pushing through. Someone said to him, "it's too much, you have to get some help, you can't keep pushing and hiding like this for the rest of your life!" "Just watch me," was his response.

"Just watch me." That is so many of us--we believe that we can carry anything, endure anything, fix anything, ["Yes We Can"](#).

Until we can't. Until our defenses fail, our enemies are too strong, our health is threatened, the losses keep on piling up.

And then, when it all starts to break, we have a choice. Burkeman's article continues:

Most of us subliminally spend our days scrambling to get to a point where we feel like life's finally in working order, and everything's under control – which for you might mean total financial security, becoming the perfect parent, leaving your childhood traumas entirely behind, or anything else.

The "burden-lightening" approach, as preached in a thousand self-help books, involves somehow actually reaching that place of safety. The burden-increasing approach, by contrast, involves pointing out that the goal was impossible all along. And when you grasp that you were chasing a mirage, you're disinclined to keep chasing. You get to relax into life as it is.

...Of course, realising this doesn't magically make it fine to be overstretched, sick or struggling financially. But it triggers a kind of inner liberation. You're still in a bad fix, but you're no longer staking everything on achieving an impossible kind of escape from it. Moreover, the result of this shift isn't that you become passively resigned to your fate. Instead, you're more motivated to take whatever useful actions you can.

Faith like a child?

naivete // healthy and unhealthy

humility // deferential and vulnerable

unburdened // aware of our limitations
and ready to work at what can be done



And so Na'arah recognizes that she is a slave, *and* that she still has something to offer, her life still has meaning and purpose.

And so Na'aman realizes, eventually, that his power and reputation can't beat this disease, so he sets those aside in search of hope beyond himself.

And so Jesus gently reminds his followers that they're still a bunch of unimportant, ill-equipped simpletons--and that this is a gift, not a curse. The very realm of God is filled with people who are out of their depth, with no choice but to rely on one another and the grace of God to make it through.

Our burdens really are too heavy for us to carry. So now what?

Burkeman again:

Whenever all of this pops into my awareness – when I realise I'd been trying to convince myself that we aren't really living through dark times, when the fact is that we are – I'm always surprised when what follows isn't an all-consuming sense of horror and despair, but a surge of bracing, roll-your-sleeves-up pragmatism. Very well, then: so this is how things stand. Time to figure out what, if anything, I can do about any of it.

"Don't pretend these aren't dark times:
acceptance can be bracing"
in *The Guardian*, May 15, 2020

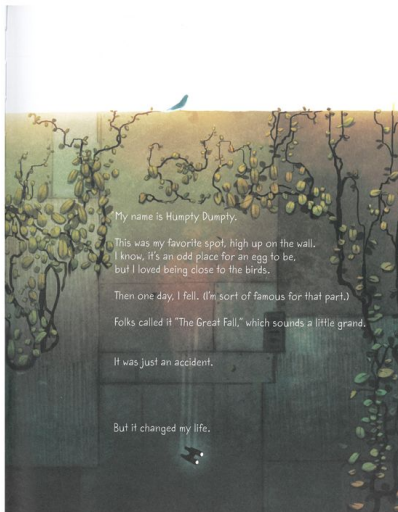


That's what I see in Na'arah's story. Rather than denying her vulnerability, rather than pining for a fix, she acknowledged her situation. And in that, she also recognized that her faith had not been shattered because what had happened to her. She still hoped and trusted, not in the God who would bring the life she wanted, but in the God who was still with her in the life she had.

And from that place of humility, she recognized that what she had found was something worth sharing.

One of my favourite books is by [Dan Santant, *After the Fall: How Humpty Dumpty Got Back Up Again*](#).

[Watch and Listen here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n63tGkSzNrc>]



My name is Humpty Dumpty. This was my favorite spot, high up on the wall. I know, it's an odd place for an egg to be, but I loved being close to the birds.

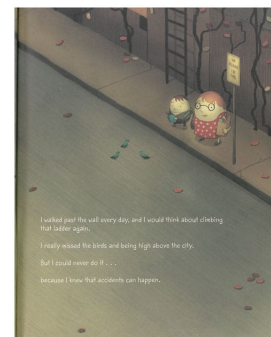
Then one day, I fell. (I'm sort of famous for that part.) Folks called it "The Great Fall," which sounds a little grand. It was just an accident. But it changed my life.

Fortunately, all the king's men managed to put me back together. Well, most of me. There were some parts that couldn't be healed with bandages and glue.

After that day, I became afraid of heights. I was so scared that it kept me from enjoying some of my favorite things.

I walked past the wall every day, and I would think about climbing that ladder again. I really missed the birds and being high above the city. But I could never do it...because I knew that accidents can happen.

I eventually settled for watching the birds from the ground. It wasn't the same, but it was better than nothing.



Then one day, an idea flew by...



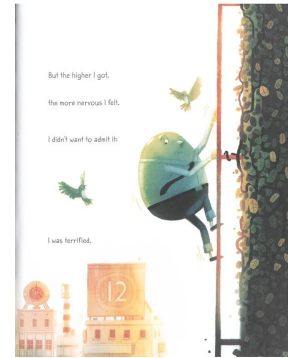
Making paper planes was harder than I thought. It was easy to get cuts and scratches. But, day after day, I kept trying...and trying... until I got it just right.

My plane was perfect, and it flew like nothing could stop it. I hadn't felt that happy in a long time. It wasn't the same as being up in the sky with the birds, but it was close enough.

Unfortunately, accidents happen.... They always do.

I almost walked away, again. But then I thought about all the time I'd spent working on my plane, and all the other things I'd missed. I decided that I was going to climb that wall.

But the higher I got, the more nervous I felt. I didn't want to admit it: I was terrified. I didn't look up. I didn't look down. I just kept climbing. One step at a time...



Until I was no longer afraid.

Maybe now you won't think of me as that egg who was famous for falling.

Hopefully, you'll remember me as the egg who got back up... and learned how to fly.



This is faith, my friends. Not finding a cure, not a return to the way things were or the way we'd like them to be. But the gentle humility of recognizing where we are, who we truly are, and finding the courage to take the next step towards wholeness. This is the kingdom of God.

Sharing Time // ["Hey Wildwood..." online sharing](#)

Not hearing from one another in person through the Sharing Time is a significant loss for many of us. It's not the same, but one way to express your grief, anxiety, prayer requests and gratitude is through the "Hey Wildwood" link above. If you're able, join us for our Sunday Morning Zoom gatherings, or check your email for the sharing items from last Sunday. Or maybe now would be a good time to pause your reading to call someone from church or elsewhere that you haven't heard from this week.

Congregational Prayer

Loving and compassionate God,
Through Jesus you have called us friends,
And as a friend to us, you know all about us.
You know how we feel, whether sad or distressed,
You know when we are upset or anxious or just out of sorts,
And you love us just the same.

You know when we are happy or celebrating
or simply delighting in the simple things of life.
You know when we are grateful for all that we have been given.

Loving God,
As you are a friend to us, and we to you,
In this time of insecurity and tensions,
we want to share that love to all around us,
in our families, in our communities,
and to all the world around us.

And so we pray together the Prayer of St. Francis:

**Lord, make me an instrument of Your peace;
Where there is hatred, let me sow love;
Where there is injury, pardon;
Where there is doubt, faith;
Where there is despair, hope;
Where there is darkness, light;
And where there is sadness, joy.**

**O Divine Master,
Grant that I may not so much seek**



to be consoled as to console;
To be understood, as to understand;
To be loved, as to love;
For it is in giving that we receive,
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
and it is in dying that we are born to Eternal Life.
Amen.

Offering Prayer

Lord, in this time of uncertainty and upheaval, we are thankful for the little things. For friends to text or call or video chat, for warming sunny days and the promise of summer, for food and shelter. For work if we are working, for time if we are not.

We want to offer our energy and time and resources to your work. We know that many of us are in a position of relative wealth; help us also be equally generous. Fill us with your grace, open our hearts and hands to wherever we see need around us. Please accept our gifts and thanks. Amen

Song // [Go, My Friends, in Grace](#) // Sing the Story #57

Benediction

Go in the care of God,
who knows how we were made
and remembers that we are dust.
Go with the peace of God,
who forgives all our iniquity
and loves us with an everlasting love.