

“Life’s Too Short To . . . Play It Safe”

I'd like to ask you to do something, if you would, at the start of this message. If you'd get out your outline. And on that first blank write down the year in which you were born. You can carefully shield this piece of paper away from anybody else so they can't see it, but write down that year!

And then make a dash, and on the right of that dash, write down the numbers “2-0” and then two blank spaces there. 2-0-blank-blank, because we don't know what that year will be yet. So you do that on your paper, I'll do mine on this piece of paper up here. I just wanted to see if you were watching!

Every one of us has one of these dates. There was a day when you entered this world. And we mark that day, we celebrate that day, we remember that day. But every one of us also has one of these dates when we will leave this world. We don't like to think about that a whole lot. And some people live in denial about the fact that their life will end. But every one of us has these two dates.

But in between your first day and your last day, there's this little dash. And what that's going to be like, that's mostly up to you. You and I have to cram all of our living, all of our loving, all of our growing, all of our stretching, all of our battles, all of our journeys, all of our efforts, all of our friendships into that one little hyphen.

So the question I want to ask you this morning is: What are you going to do with your dash? We all get one. We only get one. What are you going to do with your dash? It goes by so fast. And what's amazing about us is how we waste these precious lives we're given on such stupid things. Worrying about “What do other people think of me?” We get mad at somebody else and stew on that resentment for years. We live in fear about something that never even comes true.

So today we're starting a series called “Life's Too Short To . . .” because people just throw their short lives away on foolish things. Life's too short to carry a grudge. Life's too short to just work all the time. We're going to look at that. But today, we're going to look at the fact that life is too short to always play it safe.

Let's start with a question. The question is: What do you think is the most dangerous object in your home? Larry Lowden is a professor at the University of Hawaii. He's written a book about risk. He devotes one whole chapter in this book to household dangers. Some of them are what you expect. 460,000 people a year are injured by kitchen knives. Manual and power saws account for about 100,000 injuries every year. Some of these kind of surprise me. Like, do you have any draperies? Every year, 20 people in America are injured by drapery cords. Here's a quote from the book: “Annually, some 4,000 of us seriously injure ourselves on pillows.” I'm not making that up! It doesn't say how we injure ourselves with pillows. Like, you zip yourself? I don't know what happens.

But what do you think is the most dangerous object in your house? I don't know if there's any right or wrong answer to this kind of question. But I want to show you what I think is the most dangerous object in your house. Some of you have heard me talk about this before. But here it is. This is a chair. It's a special kind of chair. It's an easy chair, because that's the kind of chair we want. We want an “easy” chair. We don't buy a chair like this because of how it looks. We buy it for one reason. Comfort. We like comfort. We like to sit in our easy chair and be comfortable. As we sit in it we wear our comfortable clothing; we eat our comfort foods, we operate our home theatre systems with our Harmony remote controls—very comfortable.

Now, take a good look at me. Do I look like a man ready to spring into action? Do I look like someone who's poised for an explosion of growth and development? If God were to ask me to do a real difficult thing right now, do you think I'm ready? Ready for a nap maybe!

I ought to tell you what I think is so dangerous about that chair. I think what's dangerous about the chair is not the stuff you do while you're in it. I think it's the stuff you don't do. It's the relationships that you never deepen. It's the people in need that you never serve because you don't even see them. It's the great, desperate, urgent prayers you never pray. It's the noble thought that you never think. It's the races that you never run, the battles you were made to fight that you never fight, the laughter you don't laugh, the tears that you never cry. It's the great adventure of life with God that you were made for that you never go on.

I want to tell you, you were made for something more than just life in the chair. You were made to do something more with your life than to try to arrange it to maximize comfort, and security, and safety. You were made to spend your life in a risky partnership with God. This chair might be the most dangerous object in your house. Not because of what happens when you're in it, but because of what doesn't happen.

Now when I say that life is too short to play it safe all the time, it's real important you understand I am not talking about going out and doing something stupid or impulsive. It doesn't mean that you should never rest. It's not

a call to exhaustion. It's really about making your ordinary life an adventuresome partnership with God. It's waking up in the morning and saying, "God, whatever you have for me to do today, I'll do it."

You see, in the Bible there's a very common kind of encounter between God and human beings. These are called "call narratives" because God calls a person and gives them an assignment, a task. And there's a consistent pattern to these stories. There are certain components that occur in them over and over and over again.

And so I want to walk through these components together with you today, and see what they mean for you and for me, because I believe God still calls human beings to do his work. And that's what we were made for.

The first component is the initial call. These call narratives all start with God asking somebody to do something. Now, let me ask you a question at this point: How often, in the Bible, would you think God interrupts somebody's life and asks them to do an **easy** job? When does God interrupt somebody's life and say, "I've got an assignment for you, and it's pretty quick and there's not much demand attached to it." How often does that happen in the Bible? Rough guess? Never. It never does! God never gives anybody an easy job.

There's a whole chapter in the Bible, the eleventh chapter of the letter to the Hebrews in the New Testament, that summarizes the life of one person after another where God interrupts them and gives them something real hard to do.

God comes to **Abraham and Sarah** and says, "I want you to leave everything that's familiar to you. Go to a far country that I'll show you when you get there. And at the age of ninety-nine, I want you to have a son, start a family."

God comes to **Moses** and says, "I want you to leave a life that's very comfortable--shepherding--and go back to Egypt, where you're wanted for murder, and defy the Pharaoh." God called all kinds of people, but he doesn't call them to easy, comfortable lives. The writer describes the lives of people who say "yes" to God. Some of their names are Gideon, Barak, Sampson, David, Samuel and others whose names were not mentioned who faced all kinds junk. Listen to this: **"Some faced jeers and flogging, while still others were chained and put in prison. They were stoned; they were sawn in two; they were put to death by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated--the world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground" (Hebrews 11:36-38, NIV).**

Now after reading through words like this, how high of value would you say God placed on making sure people who follow him lead comfortable lives? Not very! The God of the Bible is very concerned about us, the Bible says, and loves us intensely, and wants you to grow, and wants you to be strong, and filled with courage, and wisdom, and radiant goodness.

But this God, from what we read in Scripture, is not particularly concerned that our lives be real comfortable! And it's very important we understand that because we live in a world where comfort is one of the things that we're most often encouraged to pursue, to give our lives to, to buy at any cost. And sometimes people will think about God and say, "I said yes to God, but he didn't make my life comfortable. He didn't give me all of the things that I wanted to feel safe and secure, and well off." And they can feel kind of betrayed by God, but God never promises that stuff. God calls people, generally, to do things that may be quite difficult.

That's the first thing that happens in these stories: God issues a call. Then secondly, **there's always a response.** So here's the question: When God gives somebody a hard assignment, how often does the person say back to God something like this, "What a great opportunity! Defy Pharaoh, take on the Midianites, spend the night in the lions' den, walk into a fiery furnace, give birth to the Messiah, marry a woman that's pregnant and says she's still a virgin, face jeers, flogging, chains, prison. Fabulous! What a great challenge! Can we super-size it?" Almost never do people respond to God like that in the Bible. Almost always the response is fear! Sometimes it's fear of inadequacy. Sometimes it's the fear of failure.

Maybe the classic case in this regard is the whole story that concerns Moses. God calls Moses to confront Pharaoh to free the Israelites. Moses is so scared he says "no" to God five times. Five times in a row he comes up with an excuse. I mention this because sometimes people say things like, "God would never ask me to something I'm scared to do." Or, "God would never ask me to do something that I can't handle." Oh really?!

In the Bible God almost always asks people to do something they can't handle--on their own. In the Bible, when God calls somebody to do something, their initial response is almost always that they're scared to death. So, if there's a challenge in front of you, a course of action, a road that if you walked down it would cause you to grow and would be a blessing to people that are around you, but you're scared to do it, be real careful about saying no. Be real careful about saying no, because there's a real good chance that God is in this challenge.

I'll go a step further. If you're not facing any challenges too big for you in your life right now, if it's been a long time since you've been scared, it's real possible that you've been in this chair a little too long. Listen, nobody gets to

the end of their life and looks back at time in the chair and says, "Man, those were great memories, those were great days." God calls. Almost always, people are scared, they feel inadequate.

Then the next component in these stories is: **God gives a promise.** God offers reassurance. You see, God knows people get scared, and he makes a promise. So God says things like: "**Be strong and courageous. Do not be terrified; do not be discouraged. For the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go**" (Joshua 1:9, NIV). Some of you need to write those words down and carry them with you all week, wherever you go.

Now this doesn't mean that if you follow God, nothing bad will ever happen to you. The Apostle Paul, who said "yes" to God, who went on the adventure of his life, he had a lot of bad things happen to him—imprisonment, beatings, public humiliation, etc.

You see, God never promises that if you follow him, your life will be easy. The promise that gets made over and over is: Nothing can separate you from God and from God's love.

So, God calls somebody. That person is scared and feels inadequate. God gives a promise, he reassures them, "I'll be with you." That leads to the fourth component, which is **the decision component.** You've got to decide. What really matters when God calls you to do something is not whether or not you feel inadequate. Of course you'll feel scared, of course you'll feel inadequate. What matters is your decision, whether you say "yes" or "no" to God.

And remember as you think about this, when you say "yes" to the challenge and risk an adventure of life with God, that's when you feel fully alive. Comfort never made anybody feel alive down to the tips of their toes. It never did. It never does.

One of my very favorite things to do is snow ski. I don't get to go but every 3 or 4 years, but I truly love it, because it makes me feel alive. There's something about getting out there on the mountain, way up high, getting on and off the lift, standing at the top of a slope, feeling the rush of adrenaline, knowing the risk, feeling scared, excited and very, very much alive.

You see, what matters when you stand and face that call, that challenge, is not whether or not you feel fear or inadequacy. Of course you will. What matters is will you say "yes" or "no" to God? That's what matters. That's all that matters.

So let me ask you. What risk is God asking you to take now today? Maybe it involves a **relational risk**, telling the truth to somebody, and you've been scared. Maybe God is calling you to **a different vocational direction**, but you've been holding back because you're afraid. Maybe you're **holding on to your money** right now because you'd like to buy a very expensive chair that has a massage unit in it. You'd like to arrange for a real comfortable life. And maybe God's calling you to give some of that money away, and you're kind of scared to let go.

Maybe God's asking you to explore some whole area where he's **gifted you to be able to serve** other people, but you've been holding back. For some of you, there's a **secret sin** nobody knows about, maybe an addiction or some kind of pattern that's real destructive. And you've been scared to death somebody would find out, so you've never gotten help. And the challenge for you is will you seek the help that you need so that you don't get to the end of your life having carried this crushing burden of shame, and guilt, and junk the whole way through? But it's going to take a real act of courage for you to say "yes". For some of you, maybe your marriage is kind of stagnant, and you need to have a courageous conversation with your wife, with your husband.

For some of you, you're just at the beginning of searching for God, and you need to say, "I'm going to do whatever I have to. I'm going to get information, read books, get in a seekers' small group. I'm going to find out whatever I need to find out to finally get off the ledge spiritually and make a commitment."

Maybe you're going through a real deep loss or pain. And your challenge is just to hold on, just hold on.

Where is God asking you to get out of the chair? To say yes? And I'll tell you why it matters so much. It's because the fifth and final component of these stories always ends up being the story of **a changed life.** Every story of a call from God ends up being the story of a changed life. In the Bible, every time somebody says "yes" to God, their world changes a little bit.

After Jesus was gone two of his disciples, Peter and John, courageously keep telling people about Jesus and this amazing way of life that he offers. And the authorities don't like this. They try everything they can to get John and Peter to shut up. They try to intimidate them. But John and Peter just won't stop talking.

So there's this great statement in Acts 4:13. Talking about the people that hold all the power, "**When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus**" (Acts 4:13, NIV). They had no status, no position, no impressive education, no degrees after their name. They were ordinary guys. But Jesus had just rubbed off on them. Every time you say "yes" to God, especially in a difficult situation, you change a little. Your faith gets a little deeper. Your courage gets a little stronger. Your light glows a little brighter.

But sometimes in the Bible, people say “no” to God. They’ve got a really nice comfortable chair and they miss the chance of a lifetime. It’s real important that you know this. When you say “no”, when God asks you to do something and you say “no”, your heart gets a little colder, and you get a little harder of hearing, and your faith gets a little weaker, and you get a little more addicted to the chair. And it gets a little less likely that you’ll ever get out of it. And your spirit dies a little. I know. I’ve been there. Recently.

Janet and I spent last weekend with my family celebrating my mom’s birthday in St. Louis. We got back Sunday evening about 5. We were going to watch the Super Bowl. I ran to Snak Atak to get some chips and a fountain Coke for my wife. Cans and bottles won’t do. I walk in and head to the fountain and I hear a woman swearing. The Mountain Dew had run out. I’m at the next machine getting my drink and casually ask the woman, “Why aren’t you watching the Super Bowl?” She says, “We just brought my sister into the emergency room, she’s in ICU now.” I said, “Is she going to be OK?” She said, “It doesn’t look good. They think her brain may have been starved of oxygen. They don’t know if she’ll pull through.” I felt something in me wanting to say, “Can I help, can I do something, can I pray for you. Here’s the number of the church if you need something.” It was on the tip of my tongue. But then another part of my brain took over. “You’ve had a 9 hour trip today. The game is starting. Your wife is waiting. You could end up at the hospital with a dying woman. They may get you involved. And if she doesn’t make it, then what?” I’m sorry to say, that part of my brain won out. I was firmly planted in my easy chair. I said something like, “Take care, I’ll hope for the best.” The easy chair got me.

That was Sunday. Tuesday several of the staff were going down to Salvation Army for the Homeless Connect Event. It’s a day for agencies and churches to help the homeless find ways to not be. We were supposed to do it last week but it got snowed out. Tuesdays are my days to get the message ready. I protect that day, and I don’t like anything to interrupt it. I told the others that I would not be there. But Tuesday morning I was reading a book all about being a servant. And I’m sitting down to prepare a message called “Life’s too short to play it safe.” I start thinking, “Aaron, look at what you’re doing! You’re playing it safe.” And I got that feeling I had at the Snak Atak. “Do something, go. Take the risk.” This time I got out of my chair and went. We served, I talked to several homeless men. I listened to their stories. I found my heart warming. If this message sucks it’s because God made me go down there!

I realized later that a lot of times we don’t want to do stuff like that because if you see, and if you hear the stories, you know you’re going to want to do something, and that something can’t be done from the chair. But that something blesses others and makes you truly alive.

One day, you entered this world. It was a good day. One day, you will leave the world. I don’t know when. Maybe today, maybe tomorrow, maybe not for a long time. In light of eternity, it really doesn’t matter a whole lot. But that day is coming. Don’t pretend like it’s not. In between the first day and the last day is the only life you will ever have. So what are you going to do with your dash? God is teaching us to not always play it safe, to take some faith-based risks. Pray for them, prepare for them, sieze them, say “yes.” And for today that is the Good News. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I thank Rev. John Ortberg, Senior Pastor at Menlo Park Presbyterian Church, for his wonderful resources for this message.