“Life’s too Short to…Play it Safe.”

Wow! 25 years that Janet and I have been here at Saint Paul’s! It really is hard to believe! When we got here we were young professionals with no kids. We lived in a duplex with our cat. Janet taught school down in Neosho. We had no idea how long we’d be here. But now we’ve lived here longer than we’ve lived anywhere, ever. Both of our kids were born here. Joplin is our physical home and Saint Paul’s has been our spiritual home.

One of our young staff members asked me, “So, Aaron, what’s that like to be somewhere 25 years in ministry?” I said something like: It’s the best and worst. The best is to look back and see so many lives changed, people who rejected God at some point come to a whole new awareness of God’s reality, so many people connect to God and put their faith into action. I’ve seen our congregation make a significant impact on this community, making a real difference in poverty, and addiction, and illiteracy. In 25 years we’ve had so much fun together, laughed and learned and created together. It’s been the best!

But it’s also been the worst. By that I mean, hard things. Burying people that I really grew to love. Grieving with families after suicides and the deaths of children. Going through the tornado. Saying goodbye to friends over theological issues. Construction projects, and capital campaigns. Hard, hard things.

But I would not have wanted to experience all those good things, and all those hard things anywhere else but here, with anybody else but you. Looking back there are a few things I would do differently, but they are very, very few (ok, growing a soul patch was a bad idea!). But I feel so blessed, so privileged, to have been a part of this church, and this community for these 25 years. What a great past! But here’s to the future…together…for Jesus!

So today we’re continuing this series called “Life’s Too Short To …” because it’s too easy to just throw our short lives away on foolish things. Life’s too short to be defined by shame. Life’s too short to just work all the time. Today, we’re going to look at the fact that Life’s 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 wrote a book a while back 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. I don’t know how that happens!

But what do you think is the most dangerous object in your home? 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. 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 big screen TV’s with our remotes—very comfortable.

Now, take a good look at me as I sit in this easy chair up here on stage. 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 this 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 because you’re in it. 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 fought, 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 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 God’s work. And that’s what we were made for.

The first component is “The call” the initial call. These call narratives all start with God asking somebody to do something. Now, let me ask you a question: 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 calls anybody to do 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 of crazy stuff. 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).

Now after reading 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 goodness that radiates out of you.

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 are difficult.

That’s the first thing that happens in these stories: God issues a call. Then secondly, “The response” 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! I love 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.

Take 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 do 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 the time in the chair and says, “Man, those were great memories, those were great days.” God calls, and almost always, people are scared, they feel inadequate.

Then, the next component in these stories is: **The promise**. 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). That’s tattoo worthy, right there! 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 of an adventurous 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 couple years, but I really 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, and a cup holder, and USB port. 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. Maybe 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 Life 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, and not give up!

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. It talks 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). They had no status, no position, no impressive education, no degrees after their name. They were ordinary guys. But, Jesus had 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.

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’s 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 it? God is teaching us to not always play it safe, to take some faith-based risks. Pray for them, prepare for them, seize 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.