

Josh's Faith Journey

- Before I begin, I'd like to take this opportunity to thank those that have shared their Faith Journey with our congregation in the past. You were the ones that stepped out of your comfort zone, took that leap of faith, and taught us all a bit about dealing with adversity and how God can provide in times of need. Your stories were an inspiration to me.
- For my part, I feel as if I'm just beginning my Faith Journey. I'm still fairly young at 40, and with a wonderful wife and two young children, I know many challenges lie ahead. When Pastor Bob approached me about sharing my Faith Journey, I was a bit hesitant, a common reaction I'm sure. It's difficult to think about times in our lives that were challenging and sometimes painful; and for me personally, I'm not much for talking about myself or sharing my personal experiences. But I knew deep down that of the things in my life I held dearest, the ones that provided me the most opportunity to grow and to shape me into a better person, have always been the most challenging. The process of thinking about and writing this Journey forced me to reconcile some feelings that I buried years ago. It also gave me the opportunity to critically think about and to glean the lessons from some of my more painful experiences, and most importantly, to truly SEE where God has touched me.
- Growing up, I had what you'd call a typical Lutheran upbringing in ND and was blessed with a loving family. I didn't have, what I would consider, to be any truly real struggles or challenges. I'd like to think that I was blessed with a semblance of sound judgment and common sense...Sarah, I'm certain, would take some issue with that statement. The sad fact is that well into adulthood, I never really realized how lucky and blessed I was. My parents provided me a good upbringing and the tools required to become a contributing member of society; a strong work ethic, compassion for my fellow man, a desire to do the right thing, a willingness to accept responsibility and to be held accountable for my actions.
- I didn't realize it at that young age, but the Lord had his hand in all of it, all along he was gently 'nudging me' in certain directions when I really needed it. The Lord's guidance gave me a solid foundation with which to prepare myself for the challenges that I would face later in life.
- The first experience that I'd like to share with you happened in August of 2007, during the birth of our son, Tucker. I was overseas on my fourth deployment to a combat zone, flying missions into Iraq and Afghanistan off the aircraft carrier, USS Enterprise. Thankfully, I was given the opportunity to come home to be with Sarah; to do what Dad's do best...give their wives anything and everything they need during the final days of pregnancy. I made it home the day before Sarah was induced. Immediately following birth, Tucker became critically ill with a bacterium in his bloodstream that prevented him from properly utilizing oxygen. After a week of setbacks it looked as though he was going to die and the Dr's told us that they had run out of ideas and to prepare for the worst...I will never forget the moment where I lost all hope, completely broke down, let go of whatever "control" I thought I had and left everything to God's will. It was in this moment that I learned the

true comfort and strength that the Lord and our families can provide. The very next day we witnessed the true power of the Lord. For no apparent medical reason, Tucker started to make slow, but steady progress, and eventually got better...a miracle. As most of you know, he is now a healthy, energetic and vibrant 8 yr old boy.

- From that challenging time, I learned that things are always easier when you surrender your control to God and have family by your side. The Lord, our family and friends; they sustain us...especially in times of need. And LIFE is both precious and unpredictable. It's all too easy to take these things for granted when everything is "on track."
- Two weeks later, while Tucker was still in the hospital, but well on his way to recovery, I was in desperate need of the Lord's strength once again. It was time for me to return to duty overseas. I still had three long months of the deployment to get through...to me, it might as well have been three years. It was almost unbearable to leave Sarah and our little three week old. Of all the times I've had to say goodbye to family and friends to serve, this was by far the hardest goodbye I've had to endure. I could not have done it without my faith and without strength from the Lord.
- The next segments of my Journey I'd like to share with you all were revealed to me over a much longer period of time. They not only took years for me to experience, but years for me to grasp their meaning. They deal with having the strength and moral courage to rise to challenges and to do the right thing. I've been given opportunities to explore courage both from a position of strength as well as from a position of weakness. I'm not sure if these experiences are necessarily relevant but they were times in my life where I needed significant help and guidance from our Creator.

From a position of strength and health, doing the right thing requires little thought and little hardship.

- Early in my life and career, motivation and long daily work routines came easy...everything was new and exciting; I had endless nrg and motivation...now my children have it in spades! I remember the excitement of my first years of training in the Marine Corps, overcoming my first challenges. Accomplishing things I never thought I could; completing two grueling summer courses that earned me the privilege of becoming a Marine Officer, leading a night patrol, learning about different weapons and tactics. These challenges turned into lots of "firsts" for me. My first deployment, first flights off an aircraft carrier, first trips to far off places around the world. First war and combat missions in Iraq and Afghanistan. First time supporting American forces on the ground...saving lives. It was all extremely challenging, but I generally knew what the "right" thing to do was and doing so required little mental anguish. My conversations with the Lord in those days were simply for the strength and ability to accomplish tasks and to complete them without hurting myself or anyone else. There were times when I really thought he was pushing me to my limits, but I would soon find out; he was only preparing me for things to come.

From a position of weakness and uncertainty...things become much more difficult.

- Many of my 'exciting firsts' ended shortly after I returned home from my first deployment and was reunited with Sarah. Little did I know that my second deployment to Iraq was only eight months away. This one was going to be on the ground with Marine Infantry, not in the comfort of my jet cockpit...I wasn't so sure I was cut out for that...I was a pilot after all. But if there's one thing in this world Marine pilots love...it's supporting the troops on the ground. In that regard, I was eager and felt somewhat ready to tackle this challenge. The hard part...mentally preparing myself to leave Sarah again so soon, this time for another 7-8 months. This was the first time I found myself praying for strength when I was feeling pretty troubled, weak and somewhat lost.
- It was during this deployment where I learned what true exhaustion, deprivation, and loss were. Sleeping in the dirt for weeks on end, the mosquitoes, the heat, the weight of my gear. I've never been so hot, so tired, so exhausted to the bone, constantly getting shot at...carrying the body bag of a fallen Marine to the medievac helicopter...some of those days were very dark. On many days, I felt like the hollow shell of a person, struggling to carry out my responsibilities...but I was alive. And as long as I was alive I would continue to carry out my duties because I wasn't going to let the Marines around me down, and I was going to make it home to Sarah. The Lord spared me many times on that deployment...but why?
- Perhaps it was to prepare me for the two toughest decisions I've ever had to make...these two will stay with me the rest of my life. These were made from a position of feeling awfully weak and vulnerable. The circumstances surrounding these incidents made it extremely difficult to have the courage to do the right thing. And the fact of the matter is, under the circumstances, taking the easy way out and making a poor decision probably would have been justified.
- The details of those experiences aren't relevant or proper for this setting, but I can tell you that it took the culmination of everything I'd learned in life to this point, along with the Lord's strength, to guide me to the correct decision.
- So where has my Faith Journey brought me? What awareness has it revealed? Well, it's brought me much closer to the Lord and has taught me a few things about this life and how I want to live it.
 - First, God can provide miracles when you least expect them. His love and strength can help us endure and conquer any challenge placed before us. Thru him, anything is possible and we'd all be better off if we stopped trying to control everything in our lives and surrendered to His will.
 - One of the greatest gifts we all possess is the capacity to love and to be loved. It gives us something to live for, to fight for...our family, our spouse, our children, our country, our community, our congregation.

- Third, there is a direct correlation between what I consider to be most rewarding and meaningful experiences in my life...and how challenging, uncomfortable and oftentimes painful they were. The more effort we put in, the more we get out.
 - Since the beginning of my military career, I've spent an amount of time away from my friends, family, and without basic freedoms in a cumulative span measured in years. That has taught me to make the most of my time at home and to be thankful for what I have while the Lord allows me to have it.
 - Lastly, I've learned that deprivation and suffering are an important part of life. They allow us to fully appreciate the goodness life has to offer. They allow us to truly appreciate life's simple pleasures. There isn't anything more wonderful and cherished than a quiet walk with Sarah and the kids, a nap, a game of catch or watching the sun set over the Rockies. As is often said, "the best things in life are also the simplest."
- In closing, I know the Lord isn't done guiding, loving and sustaining me yet. All of these gifts provided me with the tools to overcome, what seemed to be at the time, many insurmountable challenges in my life. I'd like to share a prayer with you all that I've looked to for strength many times over the years.
 - **A Native American Prayer**
 - We ask for strength and you give us difficulties, which make us strong
 - We ask for wisdom and you send us problems and the solutions develop wisdom
 - We plead for prosperity and you give us brain and brawn with which to work
 - We plead for courage and you give us dangers and obstacles to overcome
 - We ask for favors and you give us the space to develop opportunities
 - Therefore, great spirit God...
 - We ask you to bless and assist us according to your desire and will
 - AMEN