

# “Rough Neighborhoods and the Lord Going With Us”

Judges 4:1-16  
First Presbyterian Church, Bryan, Texas

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Amy tells us of a learning experience which occurred for her and others when a very tense situation developed around the oval track at Needville High School between ten and twenty years ago.

She relates that learning experience to the over-three-thousand-year-old story which we have heard read from the Scriptures at Judges, chapter four.

Barak had no desire to accept his commander Deborah's orders to engage his people's enemy, led by General Sisera.

Theirs was a rough neighborhood three thousand years ago and half-a-world away from where we gather this morning.

In that same part of the world today – three thousand years after Deborah consented to accompany Barak – as well as half-a-world back in this direction, the world today is still a rough neighborhood.

Persons still leave home (1) like Commander Barak was asked to do, for work, possibly with some salary (which likely will *not* be increasing), under conditions which can range from risky to dangerous, as in military action. (2) Persons also leave home for terms at prep schools, technical schools, at undergrad colleges, and at grad school. (3) Persons leave home for work positions with the possibility of a growing salary. (4) And persons leave home for work positions which have almost no salary, because the goal is partnership, mission, and educational, medical, economic, agricultural, peace-making and/or spiritual development.

Amy and Travis, when I traveled down the road from Gatesville and Waco to enroll in seminary at Austin thirty-something years ago, occasionally someone, who meant well, would say, “Going to seminary: Isn't that nice?” I don't know how it is today, whether they say that to you or not; and I suspect you don't want to be rude; but do not, do not, do not ever believe that yourself! However someone might mean well if they say that to you, and however you might smile politely and nod to them appreciatively, do not believe what they say for a milli-second. There's nothing “nice” at all about what you are doing. You are going on a journey for a new chapter in your life and accepting a challenge of continuing your education and discipleship intellectually, spiritually, and relationally in the way of Jesus Christ. Whether you receive a degree from a seminary and are ordained someday or not, it makes no difference. The goal, in the providence of God, is neither a degree nor an office such as ordination. The goal is faithful service; and you are being called to some form of service away from here. For the time being, that service happens to be in a graduate school of the Church of Jesus Christ; but there's little or nothing nice about it. It will be tough in many ways.

We of First Presbyterian Church today say farewell to you, Travis, headed in a month to Georgia to our east, and to you, Amy, headed this week to California to our west. In the least, we convey to you that you go with our prayers, not once but continually, for this and all the next chapters of your lives. The world is a rough neighborhood out there, and that includes being a disciple of Jesus Christ in that world and neighborhood wherever and whenever one is called.

James Leonard Farmer, Jr. died in 1999. He was a leader in the United States' civil rights movement during the twentieth century. A journalist once told him in an interview about an exchange which occurred a few years before when she was lecturing to a university class. She asked the class why leaders like Martin Luther King, Jr., James Farmer, and others used the tactics of non-violence during the demonstrations of the late 1950s and through the 1960s. She said that, after an uncomfortable silence, a young Caucasian student replied out loud, "Because they were scared."

James Farmer said to the journalist, "We were, but not for the reason the young man thought. Anybody who went through that and says he wasn't scared is not telling the truth." *(from "The Banquet of My Years: James Farmer, Jr., Melvin Tolson, and Wiley College," by Gail K. Beil, special to the Marshall News Messenger, 2008)*

Mr. Farmer essentially was saying that worrying about one's safety is human. Worrying about the outcome is different. Some might say that the opposite of fear is courage. Others argue that the opposite of fear is trust: Trust that the outcome will be satisfactory because God is who God is, even when failure and/or harm are possibilities.

Judge Deborah, James Farmer, and others have taught and lived that way. The opposite of fear and anxiety is not courage, exactly, but more precisely is trust, because God goes with God's people, even when suffering and death are actual possibilities in the rough neighborhood which is this world.

The letter of First John offers the words, "Perfect love casts out fear" (4:18). Perfect love: That would be God's love. Perfect love, which is God's, casts out fear and gives the opposite of fear: trust. When persons trust God for an outcome of grace whatever happens, fear – even the fear of harm – will be overcome. In the rough neighborhoods and challenges of this world, any courage any of us ever feels is only the by-product of trusting the Lord of heaven and earth for an outcome of grace. Deborah encouraged Barak that way. You and I can encourage Amy and Travis that way. We can encourage one another and all of God's people that way, as well. The opposite of fear is trusting God for an outcome of grace; and courage will be its by-product.

– All honor and praise be to God.