

“Survival Skills”

September 27, 2026

Philippians 2: 1-13

If, then, there is any comfort in Christ, any consolation from love, any partnership in the Spirit, any tender affection and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or empty conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,

who, though he existed in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be grasped,
but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
assuming human likeness.
And being found in appearance as a human,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.

Therefore God exalted him even more highly
and gave him the name
that is above every other name,
so that at the name given to Jesus
every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence but much more now in my absence, work on your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

Exodus 17: 1-7

The whole Israelite community broke camp and set out from the Sin desert to continue their journey, as the Lord commanded. They set up their camp at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. The people argued with Moses and said, “Give us water to drink.”

Moses said to them, “Why are you arguing with me? Why are you testing the Lord?”

But the people were very thirsty for water there, and they complained to Moses, “Why did you bring us out of Egypt to kill us, our children, and our livestock with thirst?”

So Moses cried out to the Lord, “What should I do with this people? They are getting ready to stone me.”

The Lord said to Moses, “Go on ahead of the people, and take some of Israel’s elders with you. Take in your hand the shepherd’s rod that you used to strike the Nile River, and go. I’ll be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb. Hit the rock. Water will come out of it, and the people will be able to drink.” Moses did so while Israel’s elders watched. He called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites argued with and tested the Lord, asking, “Is the Lord really with us or not?”

Holy Wisdom, Holy Word. Thanks be to God.

Meditation

There’s a relatively new podcast I’ve been enjoying called *What to Carry, What to Burn*. It’s a podcast about wilderness survival stories: shipwrecks, plane crashes, people stranded at sea or lost in the arctic. There are a lot of reasons I like this podcast. The host, Blair Braverman, is an adventurer and professional sled-dogger, so she often adds details about what an environment is like from her personal experience. She also clearly cares about these stories – you can hear in her voice the fascination with these stories, her enthusiasm when things go well.

Many people, like me, are attracted to survival stories because they show the resilience of the human spirit in the face of unimaginable circumstances. They make us think about what we might do in similar situations – or the fact that we would never attempt certain expeditions and daring lifestyles and therefore wouldn’t ever be caught on these harrowing journeys.

I’ve enjoyed survival stories here and there, but when I started listening to them regularly, I noticed some themes beginning to arise. First: if you’re going on a journey, don’t skimp on the planning stages. More than one disaster has been made worse by improper planning. Second: Sometimes who survives and who doesn’t comes down to luck – the wind changes, someone manages to spot you. So much of nature is out of our control. Sometimes you get lucky, sometimes you don’t. Third: People often have a better chance of survival if they can think about the future beyond their current predicament. One woman designed dresses she wanted to wear after she got rescued. Another man dreamed of the tortillas he would eat. These may seem frivolous, they may not make sense in the midst of life or death survival. But being able to think and plan ahead helps give people hope.

But beyond all of this, I’ve been paying attention to how some people step up and meet the challenges they find themselves in, and others become almost incapacitated by the enormity of their situation. One early episode details the wreck of a ship called the Grafton, in which a group of men find themselves stranded on a deserted island in the South Ocean. They begin to have some interpersonal issues, but one man, Raynal suggests they elect a leader, and so they establish a democracy. Then Raynal proposes that they all take turns being cook and housekeeper for a week at a time to share the work. It’s sort of a dirty and thankless job.

But Raynal has a second brilliant idea:

Raynal volunteers for the first week as housekeeper, and he immediately reframes things. Instead of being like, “ugh, I just have the dirty job this week,” he pours himself into going way above and beyond. So, he wakes up super early and goes fishing and catches some cod, which is a bit of a treat for the guys. And he gets hundreds of mussels off the rocks, and he prepares this elaborate multi-course feast with fried fish and seal and boiled mussels and a bouquet of fresh flowers on the table.

He sweeps the house and he organizes everything. He refreshes the moss in their beds. And from then on, suddenly being a housekeeper isn’t drudgery. It’s like a chance to show off, a chance to impress everyone else and celebrate them.¹

This story is contrasted with the wreck of the Invercauld – a group of men stranded on the other end of *the same island at the same time* – where the officers lord their position over the crew and morale is incredibly low.

The most recent episode I listened to was about a man named Valerian Albanov – a navigator who escaped an icebound ship and ended up the reluctant leader of a desperate trek across the frozen sea. Some men turn around after only 11 days. Another man deserts and likely falls through thin ice. They all get snow blindness. They’re low on food and water.

But even more annoying than these conditions is the fact that the men Valerian is guiding are not taking things seriously. And somehow that’s getting worse, not better as time goes on.

He feels like they have no urgency. They keep wanting fires, so they’re burning supplies. Someone drops a shotgun in the water and it’s gone.

Someone drops the stove. Okay, they managed to hunt some birds, but they have to eat them raw now. One day Valerian is paddling across open water and he looks back, there should be five kayaks behind him.

But he only sees two. So he climbs up on a big iceberg and he waits for hours and he gets really scared. And finally these missing men show up and he’s so relieved.

He’s like, “Oh my gosh, what happened? I thought you were dead.” The men are kind of sheepish.

They’re like, the thing is there was this really cool iceberg. And we really wanted to check it out. So I don’t know, one of us couldn’t resist. He climbed on. It looked like so much fun. But then he fell in the water and he was scrambling in the water. And while he was doing that his kayak blew away. And so the rest of us saved him but he was so cold, you know, from being wet. So we, we just decided to burn our stuff to warm him up. And then once we had a fire, we thought we might as well make a meal.

¹ Blair Braverman, *What to Carry, What to Burn*, episode 3, “The Wreck of the Grafton”

And Valerian's like, these men are all children. They are children. This would be hard enough if they were taking things seriously. He says in his journal, "I will certainly not rest until I have managed to save them in spite of themselves."²

This leadership piece is where I find connection with the ongoing saga in Exodus. In last week's story, we heard God provide meat and bread for the people but instructed them to only gather what they could eat for the day. Chapter 16 says some people didn't listen and tried to gather more or save it for the next day, and overnight it became infested with worms and stank. And Moses got angry because they didn't listen. (John also frequently calls the people, "little children" in his new testament letters, so the sentiment has been shared by many leaders over time.)

Today, in the midst of yet another crisis, we hear Moses cry out to God, "What should I do with this people? They are getting ready to stone me!"

It is a big responsibility to be a leader when things are going well. But when the road starts to get rough, the responsibility starts to feel like you are the titan Atlas, condemned to hold up the sky for eternity while everyone else gets to worry about their own problems. Every decision you make is second-guessed, every step forward feels like there are two steps back. You work to juggle a whole group of differing personalities with sometimes opposing ideas on how things should go.

I have written and re-written this paragraph half a dozen times trying to articulate the heaviness and grief I am holding through this season of our church's life – the burden of holding not just my own thoughts and feelings about where we are, but every conversation, every gripe, every person who walks out those doors. Sometimes it feels like everyone is allowed to be human but me.

I know many of you are disappointed by the realities before us and sad about leaving this place. I am doing the best I can, and sometimes that's not enough. The last month preparing for the congregational vote we took last week has taken its toll on me, and I have asked the Session for a leave of absence this coming week to find some renewal. Rosangela will be filling in next Sunday, and she will be preaching this same text from a different angle – one that I think will pair nicely with where we are.

In Exodus 18, after today's story, Moses begins to delegate some responsibility to other folks because the burden of leadership is too heavy alone. I am also reminded of the many times that the gospels say Jesus went off by himself to pray. The opportunity to set down the demands of leadership and the concerns of the many to tend the self is a survival skill that allows me to continue ministry. This next year will be hard on us. Let us find grace and gentleness as we stumble through the wilderness.

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² Blair Braverman, *What to Carry, What to Burn*, episode 8, "Valerian Albanov"