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A NEW SPIRIT Michael B. Beough
Psalm 103:1-5; II Timothy 1:7 June 28, 2009
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Have you ever felt helpless, powerless, dismayed, discouraged?

There seems to be a lot of that going around these days and for a lot of good reasons. I feel that way every time I pick up the newspaper. There have been times in my life as a pastor that I have felt that way. Maybe that is why the movie *The Preacher's Wife* speaks to me.

It is about a discouraged pastor named Henry and his beautiful wife Julia. They serve an urban church in New York. Julia actually grew up in this church and now leads the music ministry. As their son Jeremiah says, his mama has sung in this church all her life. In this first film clip, as Henry preaches, Julia notices something is not right. For one thing, she has heard this sermon before. Her father preached the sermon when he was pastor of the church. As music director, she tries to help her husband add a little spice.

(View clip#1- 00:04:25-00:06:46)

Henry is a sad man in a discouraging situation. Everything seems to be working against him. The church is out of money. The youth center is being closed down by a developer named Joe Hamilton. The church boiler blows up. A teenager named Billie gets arrested for a crime he didn't commit and refuses the pastor's help. Leading members are thinking about leaving the church. His son Jeremiah's best friend Hakim is being taken away by child custody. Julia is cross with him because of his inattention to her. On top of that, his mother-in-law is staying with them over the holidays. He feels defeated and powerless.

Then he does the one thing that the Bible tells us to do when we are discouraged. Pray. Turn to God for help. In a desperate moment, Henry asks God to send him some help. Guess what! As can happen only in movies or good stories, an angel named Dudley literally plops down from heaven in a heap of snow out in Henry's front yard. You would think "problem solved." But is it?

(View clip#2 - 00:11:13-00:13:05)

Well, so much for Henry's praying. **Prayer is hardly worth the trouble if we don't expect to get answers or if we fail to accept the help God sends us.** God answers but Henry doesn't see it.

The problem with ignoring God's help is that we start devising our own schemes. Instead of listening to Dudley, Henry comes to believe that Joe Hamilton has the solution to all his problems. Joe wants to tear down the neighborhood and the church building to build beautiful high rises and a

shopping mall. He needs Henry's support to get the residents to go along with the plan. So, Joe promises to build Henry a beautiful new church. Glass walls. A fancy senior center and lots more.

Henry decides that Joe's plan will solve all his problems. Isn't that just like us? Discouraged? Buy something. Go somewhere. Change families. Only the issue goes much deeper than that, doesn't it?

In this next scene, Dudley the angel puts his finger on Henry's problem.

(View clip#3 – 01:07:58-01:09:44)

Dudley says Henry's problem is that he doesn't believe in God or in himself. The question is, "Will Henry accept the truth?" This is the central question of this movie for me. Can I accept the truth? **Can I see that so much of my discouragement grows out of my loss of faith, my lack of belief in God and in myself?** Can I see that discouragement is a deadly poison? Unchecked, it takes the life right out of me and out of those I love. It makes me do stupid things.

One man who seemed to bounce back from many discouragements with relative ease is **David**. Yes, I mean that David, the one who killed Goliath and became the King of Israel. I went to visit him to see if he could give me insight into how he overcame discouragement in his life. I found him at target practice. He was practicing with his slingshot. He was hitting bulls eyes at 25 yards.

I waited until he acknowledged me. He was a king, after all. Finally, he saw me, held out the sling, and asked, "Want to try it?"

I politely declined and explained why I was there. I went into a long speech about discouragement – how often I become discouraged just by day to day things that come my way. I told him about so many people I have known who have let discouragement take over their lives until they even turn away from God and from their families. **I wanted to know how he, David, seemed to keep from becoming discouraged.**

Like a king, he listened with a passive face until I stopped talking. He said, "So you want to avoid getting discouraged. If you can figure out how to do that, you ought to bottle it and sell it over the counter."

"But isn't that what faith is all about? Isn't it supposed to keep us from getting discouraged?"

"Well, that's a new one!" he said. "Do you want to know why I wrote all those poems you call Psalms?" He didn't wait for me to answer. "I wrote them to keep my sanity. I was on my knees lots of times in utter failure.

There were times when I couldn't sleep at night and didn't want to get out of bed in the morning. There were times I simply wanted to run away. You remember Bathsheba?"

I said, "Oh, yeah!"

"Well, you can read all about that in the Psalms. I wrote those poems to remind myself that my discouragement – lots of it arising out of my own failures – was not the biggest news of the day. When I wrote "Bless the Lord, O my soul, and do not forget all his benefits," I was telling myself not to forget the really big news.

"The big news is that the Lord God of the Universe never abandoned me. He never stopped loving me. He kept assuring me of His plans for me. That's the big news."

David put another stone into his sling. I stepped back to give him a little more space. He swung and let the stone fly. I couldn't believe it. He missed the whole target. "Think of it this way," he said. "**Discouragement is a gift from God.**"

I said, "You mean God wants us to be discouraged?"

"No. What I mean is if you are human and you care you will experience discouragement. See, if I miss the target, I could say, 'Oh, whatever! What does it matter.' Or in my discouragement, I could say, 'I plan to practice ten times harder.' Discouragement is not the sin. The sin is in allowing discouragement to keep you from trying. Think of it this way. Discouragement is a great catalyst for change."

"So where does faith come in?" I asked.

"In knowing and believing the big news. It comes in looking into the face of discouragement and being able to say like Paul did to the young pastor Timothy, 'God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline.' It comes in believing God still loves you and still has a plan for you and a plan for this world. It comes in taking the positive steps that your discouragement leads you to take."

David held out the sling again and asked if I wanted to try it. I tried it, and I can tell you it is as hard as it looks. Miraculously, after three or four tries, I hit the target. Not the bulls eye, but close enough to make me want to keep trying.

As I left him, I realized that what happens to Henry in our movie is not just a happy-ever-after ending.

On Christmas morning the congregation gathers for the Christmas pageant. A television station is broadcasting the service because Henry is supposed to announce that St. Matthew's will be torn down. Joe Hamilton is in the congregation waiting for the announcement. It will be a historic moment. But something else happens. The Holy Spirit takes over.

(View clip#4 – 01:48:37-01:53:04)

Henry calls his congregation to action. He declares that God gives us the tools to do the work God calls us to do. God gives us hope. God gives us love. God gives us forgiveness. "We can make a difference," he preaches. "We can save this church!" This startles Joe Hamilton, but even Joe gets caught up in Henry's vision. Joe knows Henry is right.

It so easy to give in to discouragement, but discouragement is no excuse for those who believe in God. **God gives us the tools to deal with our discouragements and those tools help us create a new tomorrow. There are angels all around us whom God sends to help us.** God is waiting today for His people to rise up in homes and in churches and in communities all across this land. God is waiting for us to get out of the quicksand of discouragement and powerlessness to do God's will. Will we rise up now with a new spirit to make a difference?