“Someday I hope that you will have the chance to live like you were dying.” As strange as it sounds, we think the songwriters are on to something vital here. There can be a powerful perspective that comes from living like you were dying. A practical way to bring this to life is to imagine that you simply had one month to live. If you did, what would you do for those final 30 days? A lot of people would take God and their spiritual side more seriously. Last week, we said that was a really good idea, but it’s even better to start taking God seriously before you are talking to the head of neurosurgery at Hartford Hospital.

Another thing dying people often do is to start taking more risks. Many attempt to do things they were always afraid to do. Risk has a somewhat different look when you’re dying already. In his song, Tim McGraw says, “I’d went skydiving, I went Rocky-Mountain-climbing, I went two point seven seconds on a bull named Fu Manchu.” In other words, I did some risky stuff; I stopped playing it safe. It’s exactly what happens in the movie, “The Bucket List.” In fact, one of the things the two dying men decide to do is go skydiving. I say “they.” One of them is, well, dying to go skydiving; one of them is not so thrilled about the idea. See if you can pick which one is which.

(Clip from Bucket List: Skydiving)

My friend, Jonathan, when diagnosed with a brain tumor (and in the middle of chemotherapy treatments) took a road trip to Maine to go snowboarding and snowmobiling. He actually had a stint line for his chemotherapy in his chest on that trip. I loved his words that he was “not going to die on a couch. If he died, he was going to die doing the things he really loved.”

Knowing you are dying brings a unique perspective. You are dying; so why live your life dominated by fear? This is such a good lesson. The truth is, you and I weren’t made to be dominated by fear. That is precisely why God calls us away from a “play it safe” life. In fact, he repeatedly asks us to do things that are “beyond” us, that are “bigger” than we are. Why? Because a safe life isn’t really life at all. “Playing it safe” will invariably keep you from really living.

Jesus put it this way:

*Then Jesus said to his disciples, “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it. (The Bible, Matthew 16:24-25 NIV)*

The most important decision you will ever make is also the riskiest. Will you follow Jesus and entrust your entire life to Him or not? The decision that feels the safest is to run your own life, make your own calls, look out for yourself. The risky
decision to admit that you are broken, that you desperately need God, that you are willing to surrender your life to Him.

Make no mistake. It’s a risky decision. And it’s the start of a whole life of risky decisions. If you have made the decision to follow Jesus, you have to stop playing it safe. You see, God loves us too much to let us live “the safe life.” The things that matter most in life involve taking risks.

When his dear friend, Authur Hallam, died, Alfred Lord Tennyson said in memoriam: “It’s better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all.” It’s “safer” not to put your heart out there and love someone. If you never love, you can avoid a lot of hurt. In the end, however, what you really avoid is really living.

The decision to “play it safe” is the decision to live half a life. If you determine to avoid all risk, you can never really love someone or receive love. If you insist on avoiding all risk, you can’t grow and develop. If you determine to avoid all risk, you’ll never learn to swim or fly a plane, or drive a car. You’ll never tell a joke. You’ll never ask anyone out on a date. In short, if you determine to avoid risk in life, you’ll never really live. Ironically, it can literally cost you your life to avoid all risk.

Living like you were dying means making choices to live life more fearlessly, more fully. There is this fascinating story in the Bible that has something vital to teach us about living like we’re dying, living fearlessly. It is found in a section of the Bible called “Esther,” which is the name of the gal whose story is recorded. I want to give you a summary of the story.

The first person mentioned in the book of Esther is Xerxes. This is a reference to the Persian King, Ahasuerus. He ruled a large region that extended from India to Ethiopia. He was an extraordinarily powerful and wealthy ruler, the most powerful man in the known world. At this point in history, it appears that he was preparing for an invasion of Greece. In preparing, he plans a broad display of his power and wealth for 180 days. We don’t know what this involved. Perhaps there were parades of his mighty forces and military machinery. We don’t know exactly. Some have speculated that he was looking to bolster motivation in preparation for the Greece invasion.

At the end of the six months, Xerxes decided to throw the “mother of all parties.” It was a seven-day “banquet” at his palace in Susa. Prominent officials from all over his kingdom were invited along with everyone who lived in Susa. Outside sources have indicated that some Persian parties included up to 70,000 party-goers. At some point, men and women were divided; the king had a party for the guys and the Queen hosted a party for the gals. (1:9) Again, this was not unusual. Now, listen to what the Bible says about the king’s party and then do the math.

Wine was served in goblets of gold, each one different from the other, and the royal wine was abundant, in keeping with the king’s liberality. By the king’s command
each guest was allowed to drink in his own way, for the king instructed all the wine stewards to serve each man what he wished. (The Bible, Esther 1:7-8 NIV)

So here is the summary: a party full of guys. Free beer. No limit on how much you can drink. Are you getting a picture of this party in your mind? Now, the Bible says that when the king was “in high spirits” (translation: “when the king was loaded”), he got an idea. Under the circumstances, this simply cannot be the greatest of ideas. It wasn’t. He commanded seven servants to go and:

"bring before him Queen Vashti, wearing her royal crown, in order to display her beauty to the people and nobles, for she was lovely to look at.” (Esther 1:11)

Here’s his loaded idea. Let’s have the queen wear her crown and parade her beauty in front of the men’s party. We don’t know what he intends by “parade her beauty.” At best, the idea is full of potential problems. Oh, I should probably tell you about the Xerxes communication policy; it went like this: “When I say come, you come, and if I don’t ask for you, don’t come on your own.” So, an unusual thing happens: Queen Vashti refuses. At a party to celebrate his power, she ignores him. To the most powerful man in the world, she says, “no.” The short story is that she is banished forever from the King’s presence. Oh, and then he passes a national law that all wives must fully submit to their husband’s wishes.

Several years later, likely after Xerxes’ failed Greek campaign, Xerxes wants to find a new queen, perhaps to find a kind of comfort. At the recommendation of others, he holds a kind of national “Next Top Model” beauty contest in which every young woman in all the provinces of his kingdom is required to appear. Many of them are picked to be part of his harem, but one gal is ultimately picked as the most beautiful. She was a Jewish gal named Esther, though the king and his court did not know her nationality. She had apparently been orphaned and was raised by her uncle, a guy named Mordecai, an official in the court of Xerxes. Esther becomes the new queen to Xerxes. You have to think she had some mixed feelings about that!

Not long after, one of the king’s highest officers comes to him. This official, a guy named Haman, hated the Jewish people and told the king they were undermining the kingdom, and he asked Xerxes for permission to destroy them. Xerxes gives permission, and a date is established for their extermination. Haman sees that a notice is sent throughout the kingdom, announcing the date on which the Jews will be killed and their property taken. Esther is apparently insulated from this news, so Mordecai relays the news via messenger to her.

So now what does she do? To us, the solution is simple. All she has to do is go talk to the king and tell him she is a Jew and get this whole thing turned around. That’s because we picture Xerxes and Esther married, living together in the royal palace, eating meals together each day, much as our own president and his wife might. Wrong country; wrong picture. Xerxes only talks to people when he wants. No one comes to talk to him ever unless he requests their presence, including his queen. It is literally against the law, even for the queen. (4:16)
If Xerxes wants to see the queen, he calls for her. If he wants to see another member of his harem, he calls for her. If he wants to talk to an official, he calls for him. Legally, you can't see the king unless he summons you. In fact, going into the king's inner court without being summoned resulted in immediate execution... unless the king extended his royal scepter toward the visitor. (4:11) So, this is where it gets interesting. The Bible says that Xerxes had not sent for Esther in 30 days. Maybe, he’s been calling for other women in his harem, but he hasn’t been calling for Esther, and it’s looking like a pattern is emerging.

Mordecai sends a message to Esther basically telling her: you’ve got to go talk to him whether he calls for you or not. In short, he calls this a “live like you were dying” moment. Listen to the exact words he gives her:

"Do not think that because you are in the king's house you alone of all the Jews will escape. For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father's family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?" (Esther 4:13-14 NIV)

This is what I hear in his words: “Esther, I dare you to move. I dare you to step up to the plate at this moment. If you decide to “play it safe,” it will cost you and others dearly. It just will. I dare you to do something fearless. Why? Because this is your time to shine. This is what you were made for.

“For such a time as this.” I think that all of us miss out on the reality that there are moments in life that are a part of the reason why God placed us on this planet at this time in this community, in this country. So, what keeps us from taking our place in the story? Very often, it is fear. It is the desire to maintain a safe, comfortable life. It is this insistence on keeping life “safe” that robs us of real living.

Alan Sachs puts it this way: “Death is more universal than life; everyone dies, but not everyone lives.” Invariably, “real living” involves taking a substantial risk. In the movie, “Braveheart,” William Wallace is speaking to a ragtag group of soldiers trying to save their country in the face of overwhelming odds, and he tells them: “Every man dies; not every man really lives.” This is their moment to really live, but it will require moving past debilitating fear.

This is precisely what Esther faced. Esther is like me in that she was favorably disposed towards staying alive. Most of us are. Think about it. The king hasn’t called for her in 30 days. That in itself seems to indicate that she has found some disfavor with him. Going to talk to him is likely to cost her very life. I’ve never been in that kind of position before. She weighs out what to do and finally makes a decision.

Then Esther sent this reply to Mordecai: "Go, gather together all the Jews who are in Susa, and fast for me. Do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my
maids will fast as you do. When this is done, I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish." (Esther 4:15-16 NIV)

“If I perish, I perish.” She is not being flippant here. She doesn’t want to die; she doesn’t want her people to die. That’s why she wants a whole bunch of people fasting for three days before she goes to see Xerxes. I think what she is saying here is: “The worst thing Xerxes can do is kill me.”

People who are dying are more likely to talk that way. You see, a date for the execution of the Jews has been set, and Esther knows that she is dying. So, she asks herself: What’s the worst thing that can happen? Answer: “I die, but I’m dying anyway, so why play it safe.”

But a God-follower has something even more substantial to hold on to. Death is not the end of the story. For those who put their trust in God, this life is special, but the life God has prepared after death is even more amazing. A believer is in a unique position to say: “it’s only death. It’s not the end of the world.” “If I perish, I perish.”

Esther did go to the inner court of Xerxes without being called for. I think that had to be a pretty tense moment for the security detail in the room. In that tense moment, Xerxes extends the golden sceptre and welcomes her presence. Apparently, he is VERY pleased to see her because he promises to give her whatever she wants. Apparently knowing the setting in which he will best respond, she asks to be able to throw a banquet for him and for Haman. This is quite a “banqueting” bunch. Well, it is at a banquet where she eventually asks that her life and the lives of the other Jews be spared. It ends up being a very bad day for Haman, and the Jews (in a rather roundabout way) are spared from being killed.

Now, I ask you: what if Esther had played it safe? What if she had settled for easy? She would have missed her moment. She would have missed real life. And, in her case, a lot of people would have lost out as well. Esther lived like she was dying, and it saved her life and the lives of many others in the process. Now, it doesn’t always work that way. Here’s what I mean. When people put their lives on the line for something that is right or good, they sometimes lose it. But they die, having truly lived, knowing they lived for something more valuable than personal safety and comfort. When you take a risk, there is sometimes a loss, but with the loss often comes a sense of satisfaction that you didn’t take the easy way out, that you cared about another person more than you cared about yourself.

God calls us to live a “fear-less” life because it is the best life there is. Understand this, though: We make fear-filled or fear-less decisions almost every day. In other words, a fearless life doesn’t simply involve life or death decisions. It involves much smaller kinds of decisions. But they still matter. Almost every decision we make brings up some kind of fear. These are our moments to really live. They matter more than we think they do.
Twenty six years ago, I faced an everyday fear—the fear of rejection. I wanted to ask out this attractive gal, Joy Waters, and I was scared to death. I was a junior in college and I was scared. I went all over campus trying to find the “right phone” on which to call her. I would start to call, then back off. I would find another phone, then back off. Eventually, I met her in a hallway and—with knees shaking—I asked her out. Now, what if I had played it safe? I would have lost the best human relationship I have in all the world.

The smallest decisions matter, and I want to challenge you not to play it safe. Stop worrying about what people think. So what if you fail; give it a try. It is hard to fail, but it is worse never to have tried to succeed. Teddy Roosevelt. Yes, it may cost some money, but don’t live under fear.

I think about Jonathon Booth’s dad, who said (paraphrased): “I determined to live without regrets. I don’t want to get to the end of my life and realize there are all kinds of things I didn’t do because I was afraid of what people would think, I “couldn’t afford” it, I was scared, I didn’t have time, etc.”

So, here is how I want us to finish up today. I would like for each of you to consider making your own unique “bucket list.” When you came in today, you should have been given a “bucket list” card. Let me explain our version of such a list. I want you to list some things that you have wanted to do or sensed you should do, but haven’t because they carried a certain amount of risk.

I want you to think about the fears that can keep us from missing key moments, from missing out on real life: The fear of failure. The fear of what people think. The fear of looking foolish. The fear of financial trouble. The fear of losing control. The fear of dying.

Here are some thoughts that may help you to write your list:

- What are things you haven’t done out of fear? Warned a friend? Spoken to someone about God’s grace? Stood up to some injustice at school or work? Haven’t confessed a struggle to a trusted friend?
- What are some things you haven’t done because someone would think you were foolish or might reject you? Some people have never trusted Jesus because they’re afraid of what someone will think. Are there people at school you have avoided because of what someone will think? Maybe, you have wanted to change careers or go back to school.
- What are some things you haven’t done because “you can’t afford” it? Give more generously? Hike the Appalachian Trail with your son or daughter? Take an overseas mission trip?
- What are some things we haven’t done because they feel “impossible?” Tried to reconcile a relationship? Love an enemy? Tried to lose weight.
- What are some things you haven’t done because you “don’t have the time?” A family trip away? Visiting a parent miles away?
- What have you avoided out of fear of failure? Starting a new business. Taking a hard course at school.
Where are you “playing it safe” and possibly missing out on real life?