

("Unprecedented" clip from *Sully* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7RZPch3-hBo>)

Have you ever thought about the Heroes from our Bible stories? We tend to put them up on pedestals and hail them as examples we strive to be but whose character we likely could never match. But consider what we know about each of them:

- Jacob was a cheater
- Peter had a temper
- Esther was an orphan
- David had an affair
- Noah got drunk
- Ruth was an abomination according to the law
- Jonah ran from God
- Paul was a murderer
- Gideon was insecure
- Matthew was a particularly unsavory tax collector
- Miriam was a gossip
- Martha was a worrier
- Thomas was a doubter
- Sara was impatient
- Elijah was moody
- Moses stuttered
- Tabitha was poor
- Abraham was elderly

Yet all of these people were called by God to do extraordinary things for God's kingdom. God doesn't call the qualified but qualifies the called.

Today is our final message in the Faith & Film series. I've been talking about how we as people of faith can find both our own stories in the experiences of characters on screen or in books, as well as glimpses of God's story, the greatest story ever told. Today's film is unique from the others in that it is based on a true story, the experiences of US Airways pilot Chesley "Sullenberger", better known as Sully, who landed a jet carrying 155 passengers and crew safely on the Hudson River on January 15, 2009.

Only 3 minutes after takeoff, a flock of geese struck US Airways flight 1549, disabling both engines and forcing the pilot and co-pilot Jeffrey Skiles to ditch the plane in the Hudson river. The incident came to be known as the Miracle on The Hudson. There were several minor and a few serious injuries, and hypothermia was a real risk on that brisk January day, but no one died.

Sully was a regular guy. He was a good pilot who had a solid marriage that had its own share of ups and downs. He and his wife were facing a few financial difficulties, the way all of

us tend to from time to time. Sully was only a few days from retirement when he entered the cockpit on that wintery, fateful morning.

Sully was an ordinary guy who did an extraordinary thing. When crises struck, he knew 155 lives were in his, and God's, hands. He stayed calm under pressure, allowed a lifetime of experiences and flight school training on water landings to inform his decisions, and chose to do the unprecedented water landing which he will always be remembered for.

The film feels like a documentary. It flashes back and forth between Sully's reaction to the events and various pieces of the investigation. Though the NTSB (National Transportation Safety Board) would come to celebrate Sully's actions and call the event "the most successful ditching in aviation history,"¹ originally there were questions as to Sully's decision to land in the water rather than return to LaGuardia airport, or the nearby Teterboro airport in New Jersey. Experts said Sully had plenty of time to turn back, and lamented the risk Sully took in not doing so. A series of computer simulations followed by human simulations confirmed the NTSB's concerns.

In a conference seeking to find fault for the incident, Sully, and the crew learn that according to simulations, Sully should have turned around. Sully, of course, disagrees. Let's watch a clip from the movie.

(Clip about "Human Factor" from *Sully* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tsOWjB2X5K8>)

After reattempting the simulations adding 35 seconds for human reaction time, during which no successful land was able to be simulated, the board then listened to the cockpit recording of the experience. Afterwards, it became clear to everyone that Sully had no other choice and that his decision to land the plane on the water saved 155 people that day. The pilots and the flight attendants were awarded the Master's Medal of the Guild of Air Pilots and Air Navigators in recognition of their "heroic and unique aviation achievement."

This movie might seem to be a redemption story about a man's name being cleared and his reputation saved. But actually, there is very little of that in the story of Sully Sullenberger. Sully stood by his decision from the beginning. In the clip I showed earlier, the board asks Sully about this "unprecedented" act. Sully's response is, "Everything is unprecedented until it happens for the first time!"

This doesn't mean Sully didn't have second thoughts. He said in an interview, there was "second-guessing, especially late at night." He added, "I knew that during the investigation they would be analyzing everything we did. We weren't certain for many months after the investigation that we really had made the right decisions at every juncture and would ultimately be vindicated. Most people don't understand that part of the story."²

Though Sully worries about what the outcome of the investigation might mean for his career, his legacy and his family, he remained convinced that turning back or going on to another airport could not have achieved successfully results. People would have died. When rescue workers pulled the passengers, the crew, and finally Sully (who insisted on being last)

¹ Olshan, J., and Ikumulisa Livingston. (January 17, 2009). "Quiet Air Hero Is Captain America". *New York Post*.

² Oldenburg, A. (August 30, 2016). "'Sully' Raises the Hero Question." *Popgazette E-Zine Accessed at <http://www.lifezette.com/popzette/sully-raises-the-hero-question/> on May 25, 2017.*

out of the Hudson, Sully had only two concerns. Making sure his family knew he was okay, and finding out the condition of the 154 other people on that plane. Sully's primary concern was the well-being of others, from the moment those birds hit the airplane, until the investigation had concluded.

Instead of being a redemption story, Sully is a hero's saga. In a society obsessed with superheroes who have extraordinary powers or talents that make them indispensable to humanity, Sully offers us a glimpse of a real hero, an ordinary hero, a man who did not seek fame or recognition but whose uncommon concern for others, ability to remain calm under pressure, and humility saved the lives of those on board his aircraft and left a legacy for all who would come after.

Sully's experiences reveal three defining characteristics of an ordinary hero. First is sustaining grace regardless of the circumstances. The second is a mission. And finally, humility.

Grace under pressure is an essential hero quality. It is so easy in life to become frazzled by what you cannot control. We give into that tendency way too often. But scripture reminds us that there is purpose in the things we experience and lessons to be learned along the way. In Romans 8:28 Paul writes: *and we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.* There is a tendency for us to interpret this as - if we are right with God nothing bad will happen to us, but the greater interpretation is that in the ebb and flow of life, God is present and God is good. If we allow God's grace to permeate even the most difficult, demanding, painful or stressful moments in our lives, we will find a joy that is deeper than our life experiences, and a grace that keeps us from coming undone under pressure.

Sully had such grace. I can't imagine a more stressful situation than being hundreds of feet off the ground in a flying machine full of people whose lives I'm responsible for when all hell breaks loose. My first inclination would be to panic. But Sully was a hero. He stayed calm, allowed his years of training to inform his experiences, thought quickly through all the options, made a choice, then executed it with confidence. He could have ended up being wrong, but his level-headedness kept his co-pilot and the rest of the crew calm, maintained order, and saved lives.

Heroes also have a mission. Sully's mission was to fly and successfully land the plane, but he had a greater, self-imposed mission that he followed for his life. In his memoir, Sully wrote:

Back when I was 13...a commitment I made to myself, [was] to live a certain way. I'd like to think I've done that. I've come to believe that every encounter with another person is an opportunity for good or for ill. And so I've tried to make my interactions with people as positive and respectful as I can. In little ways, I've tried to be helpful to others. And ... all of us have a duty to value life, because it is so fleeting and precious."³

Sully's commitment to live in a way that valued and helped others undergirded his actions on January 15, 2009. After the passengers had evacuated, Sully himself walked the aisles of the sinking plane, making sure no one was left behind. When ferries came to rescue people from waterlogged life-rafts and the wings of the plane where people huddled for

³ Sullenberger, C. (October 13, 2009). *Highest Duty: My Search For what Really Matters*. Harper Collins.

warmth, Sully helped them load the boats and allowed himself to be pulled to safety only after everyone else was safe. And at the hospital, Sully was not concerned for himself, only a member of his crew whose leg was critically injured, and whether or not all of his passengers were safe and accounted for. In the just over 3 minutes between bird strike and water landing, Sully contemplated the best action not for himself but for every soul on board. He was thinking about others.

Jesus provides example after example of the Christian disciple's mission to care for the least and the last. Over and over Jesus tells and then shows us how to lay our lives down for our others, making our priority sacrifice and service to others. When asked the most important lesson from the law, Jesus says in Mark chapter 12 that the greatest commandment is to love God about all else, and a close second is to love others. This is our mission—to love, to serve, to give. Heroes sacrifice themselves for the greater good, giving their all to fulfill their mission.

Finally, heroes are humble. Our culture has taught us to be so concerned with coming in first. Taking the glory whether or not we deserve it comes naturally to us as humans. But scripture tells us that humility is a prize to be sought and a defining characteristic of a follower of Christ. Peter writes in 1 Peter 5:5-6: Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, for "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble." James says it this way: Who is wise and understanding among you? Let them show it by their good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom."

Sully had that kind of humility that came from years of wisdom developed by working with crews on aircraft. Let's watch a clip from the actual investigation here the real Captain Sully displays great humility:

(clip "humility" from *NTSB Investigations* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CRvy2o-hV-Y> 1:10 to 2:06)

Sully knew that success does not belong to one person alone, but to the entire team. He was humble enough to share the success of that water landing with his co-pilot who remained calm and helped him work out all of the pre-crash checklist, and his crew who kept the passengers calm through the entire ordeal. He gave credit to the rescue workers who made unprecedented haste in pulling people out of the water. He gave credit to the investigators who, though they brought stress and sleepless nights to his life, thoroughly examined the incident and used it to inform future experiences. Sully's fast thinking and grace under pressure was instrumental in saving the plane people on that plane, but he was humble. He refused to take the glory and instead minimized his own part in the outcome.

Like Sully, we are called to humility. Sharing the glory with others and pointing the ultimate glory to God will connect us with others, illuminate a common mission, and allow us to find our own strength and solidarity in those times when we are weaker or not the one who ultimately saves the day.

Scripture is full of ordinary heroes. Esther saved her people by standing up to a bully king. David sought God's favor and led his people with humility and grace. Boaz crossed cultural lines and loved beyond expectation to save the life of a young immigrant and her mother in law. John the Baptist was willing to live counter-culture in order to pave the way for

God's coming kingdom and the work Jesus was preparing to do here on earth. And the list of Bible-examples is endless.

Chesley Sullenberger was an ordinary hero too. Maybe not the superhero we read about in comic books, but a man whose cool thinking, commitment to helping others, and willingness to share the glory left a lasting legacy on 155 people and all of the airline industry for years to come.

Each of us also has the capacity to be an ordinary, everyday hero. By maintaining a peaceful presence even when life is difficult, by lowering ourselves to allow others to be elevated, and by fulfilling our mission to love God and love others ahead ourselves, we can fulfill the great commission, to make new disciples and to transform this world for Jesus Christ. God has called us each to live a hero's life and to save the day, for the least, the last, and the lost. May it be so. Amen.