

**Words to Live By in Times Such as These
Moving Forward in FAITH**

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Three weeks ago, we heard about a young pastor who sat in his kitchen at midnight, unable to sleep because of threatening phone calls. He bowed his head and prayed, “Lord, I’m down here trying to do what’s right. I think I’m right. I think the cause we represent is right. But Lord I must confess that I’m weak now. I’m faltering. I’m losing my courage. And I can’t let the people see me like this because if they see me weak and losing my courage, they will begin to get weak.”

The pastor said, “It seemed at that moment that I could hear an inner voice saying, ‘Martin Luther, stand up for righteousness. Stand up for justice. Stand up for truth. And lo I will be with you, even until the end of the world.’ Almost at once my fears began to go. My uncertainty disappeared.”

Seven years and seven months later, that pastor stood on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial and delivered his “I have a dream” speech. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke about the “fierce urgency of *now*” — “*now* is the time to make real the promises of Democracy; *now* is the time to rise from the dark and desolate valley of segregation to the sunlit path of racial justice; *now* is the time to open the doors of opportunity to all of God’s children; *now* is the time to lift our nation from the quicksands of racial injustice to the solid rock of brotherhood.” Dr. King said, “And as we walk, we must make the pledge that we shall march ahead. We cannot turn back.”

As Dr. King shared his dream “deeply rooted in the American dream,” he quoted from the prophet Isaiah, “I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plains, and the crooked places will be made straight, and the glory of the Lord will be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together.”

Then he said, “This is our hope. This is the faith with which I return to the South. With this faith we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope. With this faith we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood. With this faith we will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together, to go to jail together, to stand up for freedom together, knowing that we will be free one day.”¹

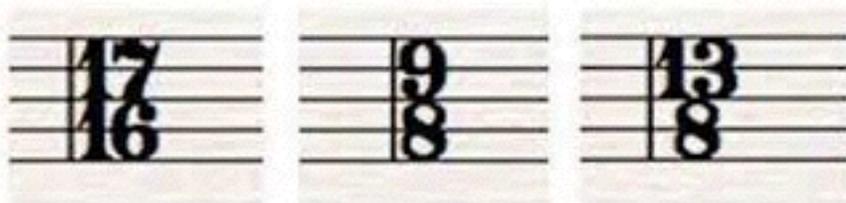
Four years and seven and a half months later, Dr. King preached his final sermon on April 3, 1968 at the Mason Temple Church in Memphis. He remembered the encounters between marchers and Police Chief Bull Connor in Birmingham: “Bull Connor would tell them to send the dogs forth, and they did come; but we just went before

the dogs singing, ‘Ain’t gonna let nobody turn me around.’ Bull Connor would next say, ‘Turn the fire hoses on.’ . . . Bull Connor didn’t know history. He knew a kind of physics that somehow didn’t relate to the transphysics that we knew about. And that was the fact that there was a certain kind of fire that no water could put out. And we went before the fire hoses; we had known water. If we were Baptist or some other denominations, we had been immersed. If we were Methodist, and some others, we had been sprinkled, but we knew water. That couldn’t stop us.”

Dr. King couldn’t have known for sure that his life would end the next day on the balcony of The Lorraine Hotel, but he certainly sensed that he might not live long enough to see the dream come true. As he ended his sermon that night, he said, “Well, I don’t know what will happen now. We’ve got some difficult days ahead. But it really doesn’t matter with me now, because I’ve been to the mountaintop. And I don’t mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I’m not concerned about that now. I just want to do God’s will. And He’s allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I’ve looked over. And I’ve seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land! And so I’m happy, tonight. I’m not worried about anything. I’m not fearing any man! Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord!”²

Our second hymn today puts it this way: “Faith begins by letting go, giving up what had seemed sure, taking risks and pressing on, though the way feels less secure: pilgrimage both right and odd, trusting all our life to God.” The note at the bottom of the page in our hymnal says, “This text affirms that faith is not a state of being but a process of becoming what we are called to be in relationship to God, other people, and the world.” Or, as Hebrews 11:1 says, “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”

Earlier this week, the picture that is in the top left-hand corner on the front of the bulletin showed up on Facebook.



these are difficult times

As someone who struggles to play syncopated rhythms and different time signatures in handbell practice, I got a good chuckle out of that pun. But, seriously, that’s a true statement — “These are difficult times.” A friend said to me recently, “We are in an extraordinary season right now.” In the midst of such difficult and extraordinary times, what does the church have to say in times such as these?

In my August newsletter article, I shared some words from a friend and colleague, Rev. Chris Currie, who used to be pastor of the Calypso Presbyterian Church in northern Duplin County and now is the pastor of First Presbyterian Church in Shreveport, Louisiana. Chris wrote to his congregation, “These are times when we come to realize that the church cannot simply be a private gathering of religiously interested people for the cultivation of their own private piety and religiosity. Ours is a public witness and our world needs our faith, hope, and love, as the bullets fly and the flames of rhetoric are [fanned, *sic*], as families grieve and our distrust of each other is used as a societal wedge to keep us from working together on the things that matter. There is no such thing as private Christianity. We are called to go to church, but that’s not it. We are also called to be the church, and to trust that God will give us just what we need in these times to do just that, until Christ’s kingdom comes.”

In the next six weeks, we will hear some words to live by in times such as these: FAITH, LOVE, HOPE, ENDURANCE, FAITHFULNESS, and PEACE. Today’s word is FAITH. After the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews describes faith as “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen,” he doesn’t then go on to say something like, “Faith is agreeing to a set of doctrines. Faith is signing your name to a list of ten things to believe.” Instead, he tells the stories of people of faith, and as a preacher he gets the rhythm going: “By faith Abel . . . by faith Enoch . . . by faith Noah . . .” and on and on as he goes through the roll call of the “heroes of the faith.”

Also this week I saw this quote on FaceBook from Abraham Maslow, an eminent 20th century American psychologist: “You will either step forward into growth, or you will step backward into safety.” If we tweak that quote just a bit, it fits nicely with the idea of FAITH: “You will either step forward in faith, or you will step backward into safety.” The quote also nicely describes the story of Abraham who “set out, not knowing where he was going” because God called him to go; who “lived in tents in a foreign land, as a stranger and foreigner in a foreign land”; who “looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God,” although Abraham “died in faith without having received the promises.”

Webster’s *New Collegiate Dictionary* defines FAITH as “belief and trust in and loyalty to God” and “belief in the traditional doctrines of a religion.” While the second definition plays a role in our lives and in the church (we affirm our faith each week with the words of the Apostles’ Creed), the first definition describes Father Abraham’s faith, as well as the faith of all of the other heroes and heroines of the faith whose stories are told in Hebrews 11. The New Testament never really defines faith; rather, we hear stories about what people of faith *did* in trying times. Even so, faith is not just a collection of admirable deeds done by loyal people. Instead, FAITH is the underlying characteristic that helps them do what they do. As someone has put it, “They all believed that God is going to prevail in the end, AND that such a conviction should inform the decisions they make and the actions they take. . . faith combines a central, core belief in the existence and ultimate triumph of God and God’s ways, with a realistic appraisal of the world today. It then acts in accordance with God’s ways, even when it seems counter-

intuitive, in order to affect the current reality and move it toward God's reality. . . [faith] is a quiet, firm conviction that in spite of whatever evidence our current reality tries to throw at us . . . there is a God, that God is loving and good, and that loving and good God is both the Ground of All Being and the Ultimate Winning Reality."³

God promised Abraham three things: that he would be Abraham's God, that Abraham would have descendants as numerous as the stars in the night sky and the sands of the seashore, and that God would give them the land. The only problem with those promises, as good as they sounded, was Abraham and Sarah didn't have any children and they were already old. Abraham was "as good as dead" and Sarah was barren. Besides that, Abraham and his family were nomads, aliens, sojourners, strangers in a foreign land. In other words, everything in Abraham's world told him something different from God's promises. And yet, Abraham had FAITH. Abraham trusted. Abraham obeyed. And Abraham acted because he had faith that the one who had made the promises was good for them. Abraham certainly believed certain things about God, but his faith was more than just a set of theological ideas or doctrinal statements about a Supreme Being. Abraham trusted and acted in faith in Someone.

In the aftermath of the recent political conventions, pundits described the Republican convention as too much "doom and gloom" and the Democratic convention as too much "sunshine and rainbows." The Republicans were said to have painted too dark a picture of the country, the Democrats were said to have ignored the very real issues that confront our nation. The same is said about the church sometimes. Or, to be more accurate, that is how many Christians describe the world in which we live — either all doom and gloom or a rosy picture of happiness. The former ignores the fact that God created the world and all that is in it and called it good. The latter either ignores the very real issues that confront us, or else turns the faith into a private matter of "my own salvation."

But we are called to live by FAITH, not by sight. A mentor once told me, "Christians should know what they believe and why, and then be able to tell people." So, saying what we believe with an Affirmation of Faith is certainly a part of our faith lives. But, if we leave it at that, our faith is really nothing more than an intellectual exercise.

An old Greek proverb says, "A society grows great when old men plant trees whose shade they know they shall never sit in." Abraham looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God. All of them were seeking a homeland, a better country. Many of them, including Abraham, never got there — at least, not in this life. But that didn't keep them from moving forward in FAITH, even when the circumstances of their lives argued against the wisdom of living their lives that way.

We talk about taking a "leap of faith." As believers, we are called to do just that, in times such as these, much as Abraham was called to take a "leap of faith" and leave Haran, "not knowing where he was going." As believers, we may leap into the unknown, but we trust in the Someone who is standing on the other side to catch us.

The great spiritual writer, Henri Nouwen, said he received his greatest revelation about faith at the circus. He went to see the great German trapeze group “The Flying Rodleighs.” Nouwen was amazed as the trapeze artists flew through the air high above the audience. When the show was over, Nouwen had the chance to speak with the great Rodleigh himself. He asked the man how he was able to do what he did so high up in the air, with such grace and ease. The great trapeze artist said, “The public might think that I am the great star of the trapeze, but the real star is Joe, my catcher . . . The secret is that the flyer does nothing and the catcher does everything. When I fly to Joe, I have simply to stretch out my arms and hands and wait for him to catch me. The worst thing the flyer can do is try to catch the catcher. I’m not supposed to catch Joe. It’s Joe’s task to catch me.”

Someone has said, “When trouble comes, so often we try to grab on to God. We think if we do enough mental gymnastics or enough fanciful praying, we can somehow catch God. It’s not our job to catch God. God catches us.”⁴

Inspired by Dr. King’s “I have a dream speech,” Curtis Mayfield wrote the song “People Get Ready,” which he and his group, The Impressions, released in February 1965. Mayfield’s biographer wrote, “I think it’s a song that touches people. It is a song of faith really, a faith that transcends any racial barrier and welcomes everyone onto the train. The train that takes everyone to the promised land, really.”⁵

*People get ready, there’s a train a comin’
You don’t need no baggage, you just get on board
All you need is faith to hear the diesels hummin’
Don’t need no ticket, you just thank the Lord.*

*People get ready for the train to Jordan
picking up passengers from coast to coast
Faith is the key, open the doors and board ‘em
There’s hope for all among those loved the most.*

*There ain’t no room for the hopeless sinner
Who would hurt all mankind just to save his own
Have pity on those whose chances grow thinner
For there’s no hiding place against the Kingdom’s throne.*

*So people get ready, there’s a train comin’
You don’t need no baggage, you just get on board
All you need is faith to hear the diesels hummin’
Don’t need no ticket, you just thank the Lord.*

Let us pray: Eternal God of promise, your saving grace brought a people from captivity into a land of promise. Your enduring love still leads us from places of captivity into a promise of peace, forgiveness, and eternal life. Your promises endure forever. We trust that your promises will be fulfilled. Amen.

NOTES

¹Owen Collins, compiler, *Speeches that Changed the World* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), Martin Luther King, 28 August 1963, “I have a dream,” pp. 399-404.

²Martin Luther King, “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop,” at www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches.

³“Can We Get a Grown-Up Faith?” August 4, 2013 at www.brucewriter.com.

⁴The Nouwen citation is from *The Only Necessary Thing: Living a Prayerful Life* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1999), pp. 195-196. The illustration was found in “When Trouble Comes” by Rev. Dr. Charles Reeb at www.day1.org.

⁵“People Get Ready: Song Inspired by March on Washington Carries Enduring Message,” August 26, 2003 at www.npr.org.