

Genesis 11:31 - 12:9; 15:1-6 Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16 August 14, 2022

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

FAITH FOR THE JOURNEY

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.

*He flies through the air with the greatest of ease
The daring young man on the flying trapeze
His movements are graceful he tries hard to please
I know that he must be the best.*

*He floats through the air doing turns like a bird
He flies without wings at least that's what I've heard
He flips and he flies high above you and I
I wonder when he will come down.*

That catchy song was written about Jules Léotard, a daring and innovative young French trapeze artist and, yes, the designer of the leotard. The song was first published in 1867. I imagine you need a lot of self-confidence to be a trapeze artist. But what does the daring young man on the flying trapeze have to do with our Christian faith?

The great spiritual writer Henri Nouwen had a profound revelation about the nature of faith when he went to a German circus and saw The Flying Rodleighs, a troupe of trapeze artists. Nouwen was so impressed with their talent, he went back the next night, watched them perform, and introduced himself as a big fan. They invited him backstage, gave him free tickets, invited him to watch them practice, and even to travel with them for one week. Henri Nouwen and The Flying Rodleighs became great friends.

Here's how Nouwen described a conversation with Rodleigh, the leader of the team. "One day, I was sitting with Rodleigh, the leader of the troupe, in his caravan, talking about flying. He said, 'As a flyer, I must have complete trust in my catcher. The public might think that I am the great star of the trapeze, but the real star is Joe, my catcher. He has to be there for me with split-second precision and grab me out of the air as I come to him in the long jump.' 'How does it work?' I asked.

"The secret,' Rodleigh said, '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 and pull me safely over the apron behind the catchbar.'

"You do nothing!' I said, surprised. 'Nothing,' Rodleigh repeated. 'The worst thing the flyer can do is to try to catch the catcher. I am not supposed to catch Joe. It's Joe's task to catch me. If I grabbed Joe's wrists, I might break them, or he might break mine, and that would be the end for both of us. A flyer must fly, and a catcher must

catch, and the flyer must trust, with outstretched arms, that his catcher will be there for him.'

"When Rodleigh said this with so much conviction, the words of Jesus flashed through my mind: 'Father into your hands I commend my Spirit.' Dying is trusting in the catcher. To care for the dying is to say, 'Don't be afraid. Remember that you are the beloved child of God. He will be there when you make your long jump. Don't try to grab him; he will grab you. Just stretch out your arms and hands and trust, trust, trust.'"

"Now the Lord said to Abram, 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing.' So Abram went, as the Lord had told him." (Genesis 12:1-2,4)

"The Lord brought Abram outside and said, 'Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them.' Then he said to him, 'So shall your descendants be.' And he believed the Lord; and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness." (Genesis 15:5-6)

"By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going." (Hebrews 11:8)

"By faith he stayed for a time in the land he had been promised, as in a foreign land, living in tents. . ." (Genesis 15:9)

"By faith he received power of procreation, even though he was too old – and Sarah herself was barren – because he considered him faithful who had promised." (Hebrews 11:11)

By faith Abraham just stretched out his arms and hands and trusted, trusted, trusted.

"Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." (Hebrews 11:1) Notice what faith **is not**:

- Faith is **not** believing things that aren't true.
- Faith is **not** wishing you will get exactly what you want.
- Faith is **not** doing something in the present or making a decision, while hoping and praying the odds are in your favor, even if it's only 51% - 49%.
- Faith is **not** knowing every single detail and possibility and being convinced 100% about what you're getting ready to do.

Some people think the opposite of "faith" is "doubt." Actually, you can make a very good case that the opposite of "faith" is actually "certainty" – at least, "certainty" in the sense that we have it all figured out, all of our questions answered, and it's the logical thing to do.

In his 2006 book *Secrets in the Dark*, Frederick Buechner writes about the important interplay between faith and doubt. He says, "Faith is a way of waiting – never quite knowing, never quite hearing or seeing, because in the darkness we are all but a little lost. There is doubt hard on the heels of every belief, fear hard on the heels of every hope, and many holy things lie in ruins because the world has ruined them and we have ruined them. But faith waits even so, delivered at least from that final despair which gives up waiting altogether because it sees nothing left worth waiting for. Faith

waits – for the opening of a door, the sound of footsteps in the hall, that beloved voice delayed, delayed so long that there are times when you all but give up hope of ever hearing it. And when at moments you think you do hear it (if only faintly, from far away) the question is: Can it possible be, impossibly be, that one voice of all voices?”¹

“Faith waits even so, delivered at least from that final despair which gives up waiting altogether because it sees nothing left worth waiting for.” We don’t know a whole lot about who the “Hebrews” were who first received this letter, other than they were believers in Jesus Christ, maybe second-generation believers near the very end of the 1st century A.D. According to the letter, it seems they might have experienced some persecution. They may have become disappointed and tired of waiting because Jesus’s promised return hadn’t happened yet. Some of them may have been tempted to leave the community of faith. In other words, the “realities” of life threatened to overwhelm them and their faith.

To which the author of the Letter to the Hebrews responds, “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” (Hebrews 11:1) But the letter writer wasn’t telling the “Hebrews,” “Ignore your life and the world around you and wish for better things to come.” Quite the opposite. Just as Abraham did, we can consider God faithful who has promised us in Jesus Christ that the things we hope for and the things not seen are true and trustworthy and foundational, not just for the life to come, but our very lives right now, right here, today. It’s as if we are the flyers and God is the catcher. A flyer must fly, and a catcher must catch, and the flyer must trust, with outstretched arms, that her catcher will be there for her.

My dear friend Larry Williams, who has been my spiritual director for a dozen years, recently sent me a copy of a book he has published. He has selected and edited spiritual writings of Samuel H. Miller, minister of the Old Cambridge (MA) Baptist Church from 1934-1959 and dean of Harvard Divinity School from 1959 until his death in 1968. As I was waiting for folks to arrive for Bible study Wednesday morning, I was reading a few of the selections, including one called “Always an Element of Unclearness.” It begins this way: “There is probably no aspect of our inner life where the whole matter gets off to a wrong start quicker than in religion. We want religion to be as definite as the world we live in; more than that, we want it to compensate for the uncertainties of this life by a certainty beyond any doubt or equivocation. Yet the basic character of spirit is its openness, and it is this openness which has perennially articulated itself in the symbol of the pilgrimage as the way of spirit.”²

“By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he stayed for a time in the land he had been promised, as in a foreign land, living in tents.” (Hebrews 11:8-9) The Christian life of faith is often symbolized by a journey. The scriptures describe believers as aliens and exiles and assure us that “if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. So we are always confident; even though we know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord – for we walk by faith and not by sight.” (2 Corinthians 5:1, 6-7)

There’s that phrase again, that we’ve been hearing variations of all summer long – “we walk/we live/we act by faith.” What we believe about the life to come based on

God's promises and God's faithfulness in the past can and should make a difference in how we walk/live/act by faith in the present. Here are some interesting and thought-provoking quotes about faith:

- From Corrie Ten Boom, Christian Dutch watchmaker who hid Jews from the Nazis: "Never be afraid to trust an unknown future to a known God."
- From Dr. Francis Collins, a 1977 graduate of the UNC School of Medicine and former director of the National Institute of Health and the Human Genome Project: "Nobody gets argued all the way into becoming a believer on the sheer basis of logic and reason. That requires a leap of faith."
- From Rev. William Sloane Coffin, former minister of the Riverside Church in New York City: "I love the recklessness of faith. First, you leap, and then you grow wings."
- And from John Calvin, our forefather in the Reformed faith: "When I took the leap, I had faith I would find a net; instead, I learned I could fly."

What difference can our faith and trust in God and our hope for God's future make in our lives today? Rev. Chris Currie has described well the role of faith in our lives, not just as individuals but especially as the community of faith in the church. Chris used to be pastor of the Calypso Presbyterian Church in northern Duplin County and is now pastor of the St. Charles Avenue Presbyterian Church in New Orleans. He wrote these words to his former congregation in Shreveport, Louisiana six years ago, but they are still relevant today: "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. Our is a public witness and our world needs our faith, hope, and love, as the bullets fly and the flames of rhetoric are fanned, as families grieve and our distrust of each other is used as a social wedge to keep us from working together on 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.**" (emphasis added)

John Calvin wrote, "Faith is like an empty, open hand stretched out towards God, with nothing to offer and everything to receive." Faith is as if we are the flyers and God is the catcher. Flyers must fly, and a catcher must catch, and the flyers must trust, with outstretched arms, that their catcher will be there for them.

We have a God we can trust will always be there for us.

Let us pray: Dear Lord, faith is a gift from you and our response to you as our God. Give us true faith to sustain us as we live for you day by day. Amen.

NOTES

¹Frederick Buechner, *Secrets in the Dark: A Life in Sermons* (New York: HarperCollins, 2006).

²Larry C. Williams, *Untie Your Soul: Rediscovering the Spiritual Writings of Samuel H. Miller* (Macon, GA: Nurturing Faith, 2022), p. 38.