

IT DEPENDS ON FAITH

The Rev. J. Donald Waring
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Jesus said, *“If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their crosses and follow me. For those who want to save their lives will lose them, and those who lose their lives for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel will save them.”* (Mark 8:34-35)

Today’s Scripture readings – all three of them – have reminded me of a story I once heard about a great circus performer in the 19th century. The man’s name was Charles Blondin, and he was a master of the high-wire. In 1858, Blondin, whose actual name was Jean Francois Gravelet, was touring America with a French circus company when he first encountered Niagara Falls. The great chasm between the United States and Canada posed an irresistible challenge to the tightrope artist. When he finally secured permission from the local authorities, Blondin stretched a cable 1,100 feet across, and 270 feet above the thunderous falls. News spread that Blondin was to attempt his daring stunt, and on June 30, 1859, over 100,000 people gathered to watch him walk, then run, then even dance back and forth across the wire.

Throughout the next two summers Charles Blondin became a regular at Niagara Falls, dazzling the thousands of spectators who came to watch him. He made one high-wire crossing on stilts. Another time he carried a small oven on his back. He stopped halfway across the cable, prepared himself an omelet, and ate it. One day Blondin pushed a wheelbarrow across the wire. Next he had an assistant load the wheelbarrow with bricks, which Blondin amazingly deposited on the other side of the chasm. The crowd roared with delight. When they finally quieted, Blondin asked them, “How many of you believe that I could push a person in the wheelbarrow across the wire?” Most people in the crowd nodded their heads and raised their hands in agreement. They all wanted to see him do it. “Well then,” asked Blondin, “would one of you please volunteer to be that person?” Of course, down went every hand. Yes, they all believed in the circus performer’s ability, but on that day no one had sufficient faith to climb into the wheelbarrow and join him on the journey.

This brings me back to today’s readings in which we meet two people whom God invites along for a similar journey. The first is the disciple Peter. In the Gospel of Mark, just prior to the reading we heard a moment ago, the disciples had witnessed Jesus restore sight to a blind man (8:22-26). In response to such a mighty miracle Peter nodded his head and raised his hand in belief and faith and trust in Jesus. Peter confessed that Jesus was the fulfillment of God’s promise to Israel. “You are the Messiah” (8:27-30). Today’s reading (8:31-38) picks up right after Peter’s profession of faith. Jesus began to teach Peter and the other disciples what his immediate future held in store: suffering, rejection, death, and resurrection. Yes, resurrection at the end, but first: suffering, rejection, and death. He then pressed on with a startling, staggering challenge to trust him and follow: *“If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their crosses and follow me.”*

Peter may have believed in Jesus, but climbing aboard for the journey with Jesus would depend on faith, and on this day, Peter’s faith was insufficient. Most likely, Peter was subscribing to a triumphal, kingly image of God’s promised Messiah. He believed the Messiah should take away suffering, not lead people into it. The Messiah should make life easier not harder. So when Peter heard about the hazards of discipleship and the dangerous places it would take him, down went his hand. He even rebuked Jesus. You see, Peter knew better. But Jesus answered Peter’s rebuke with a rebuke of his own: *Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on*

divine things but on human things. To be sure, Jesus' rebuke of Peter was blistering. But I don't interpret his harsh words to mean that he thought Peter was of the devil. Rather, I believe Jesus meant to convey in the strongest possible terms that Peter's proper place was in the back seat of the bobsled. "*Peter, get behind me. I drive. You crouch down and trust. Got it?*" Peter eventually did understand, but right here at chapter 8 of Mark's Gospel, he was not ready to advance into the unknown. He was not ready for faith.

Abraham is the second person we meet whose invitation from God was to advance in faith. The story of Abraham is full of drama and intrigue. In a nutshell, Abraham believed that God had made specific promises to him: that his descendants would outnumber the stars in the night sky. They would possess a land and be a great nation. They would be a blessing to all the families of the earth. The challenge for Abraham through the many twists, turns, and setbacks of his life would be to have faith – to trust not only that he wasn't imagining things when he received God's promises, but also to trust that God would make good on his word and fulfill his promises. It would depend on faith. How did Abraham do? Did he advance in faith?

Paul the Apostle, in writing to the church in Rome, declared that he did. Paul upheld Abraham as a foundational figure for Christian believing and trusting in God. One thing that Paul wanted to make crystal clear in his letter to the Romans (4:13-25) is that God's promise was not the product of Abraham's overactive imagination. God was indeed the initiator, the mover, and the giver of the promise. In other words, the promise rests in grace. It is an unmerited, free gift that comes from God. Abraham could do nothing to earn it or hasten its delivery. All that he needed to do was accept it, believe it, have faith in it, trust it. It wasn't easy. Abraham was ninety-nine years old, and his wife Sarah was ninety. Even though Abraham saw age and mortality threatening him with no heir and nonexistence, still he hoped against hope in the promise, and climbed aboard for the journey of faith. Paul wrote that Abraham never wavered *concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, fully convinced that God is able to do what he had promised.*

What about us? What does it mean for us to have faith in the promises of God? Before we can answer such a question, it seems essential that we come clear about what the promises of God are – and what they are not. Great spiritual and emotional anguish can be the result when we mistake as promises of God that which God has never promised. Despite Peter's hope that Jesus would deliver Israel from suffering and grief, the truth is God never promised that the time of this mortal life would be free of danger and despair. Indeed, pain and anguish are part of every life, even the life of Jesus. Nevertheless, Jesus stretched out his arms on the hard wood of the cross and offered himself in obedience to God's will. So if you are looking for God to save you from the world and all its experiences of loss and woe, look again. God doesn't promise a soft, easy life. God doesn't save us from the world, but in it and through it. God doesn't save us from death, but in it and through it.

I suppose, then, that the million-dollar question is this: what does God promise us? Listen to St. Paul, who says a mouthful in the final three verses of today's reading from Romans: *But the words, "it was reckoned to him," were written not for his sake alone, but for ours also. It will be reckoned to us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, who was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification.* What Paul wants us to know more than anything else is that not only Abraham, not only the Roman recipients of his letter, but also you and I who sit here today in the 21st century can be inheritors of God's promise, which is to be a member of God's family. Membership in God's family is one of God's promises. The forgiveness of sins is another. Resurrection, even eternal life is yet another. But how do we know? As Paul wrote, it depends on faith. We will only know by walking in faith, by advancing in the direction of the promise. In the same way that Abraham trusted that God could bring forth life from a barren womb, so our challenge is to trust that God brings forth life out of death, and raised

Jesus. And not only that God raised Jesus, but that God will also give life to our mortal bodies. God has given his word. In we live our lives in such a way that our trust in God is evident. It depends on faith.

Jesus said, *“If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their crosses and follow me. For those who want to save their lives will lose them, and those who lose their lives for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel will save them.”* What does it look like in our particular time to take up our crosses and follow Jesus? I use the word particular for a reason. Of course, we can point to universal principles of what it means to advance in faith. But timeless, universal truths press to express themselves in timely, particular circumstances. Since every particular time is unique, what it means to walk by faith and advance into the unknown today will take on a character that may be different from what it meant yesterday, and different from what it will mean tomorrow.

Today, clearly, one of the urgent concerns in our land is gun violence. The past five months alone have been brutal. How do we get out in front of the next mass shooting to prevent it, or at least do better at stopping it in progress? So far the national debate has been unproductive. Neither Sandy Hook, nor Silver Springs, Texas, nor Las Vegas affected change. But now, in the wake of the Florida High School massacre, a transformation may be occurring. What’s the difference? Students themselves are raising their voices and declaring that enough is enough. They are climbing aboard buses and advancing on Washington DC and their state capitols to demand that our elected officials do more to protect them, and us. Of course, the issue is more complex than they know, but they bring the unique authority of either having survived, or sadly being the next to endure a school shooting. Hoping against hope, they are going forth in faith; they are advancing into the unknown, and seem to be dislodging a conversation that was stuck. People are listening in a new way.

Perhaps you saw the video this week of the man who is a Second Amendment supporter and a member of the NRA. For the past 30 years he has owned and safely used an AR-15 rifle. He’s not a hunter and has never used the gun for anything but target practice. He confessed that it’s really fun to shoot. But he went on to explain that in good conscience he could no longer keep the gun, given that the AR-15 has become the weapon of choice for many recent mass murderers. Nor could he risk its ever falling into the wrong hands. So with the cameras rolling he advanced into the unknown; he used a circular saw to cut the gun in half. He will continue to support the Second Amendment and maintain his membership in the NRA, but he’s been moved to go forth in faith and deny himself a particular pleasure he’s enjoyed for many years. Drastic times call for drastic measures.

Once again, these are examples of how various individuals are advancing into the unknown in response to a particular challenge of our day. Certainly, not all of these folks would introduce the concept of Christian discipleship into their doings. Some might, but others would not describe their actions as having anything to do with faith in God. Nevertheless, we can be secure in the knowledge that God is big enough to work out his purposes, whether or not they are named as such. The call of God sometimes comes without explanation, and it sometimes comes to those who don’t even know God.

As for you and me, who claim to know God and his Son Jesus Christ, it is our calling always to express God’s universal truths in the particular challenges of our day. So we advance in faith when he says, *“If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their crosses and follow me. For those who want to save their lives will lose them, and those who lose their lives for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel will save them.”*