

Faith Enough

Genesis 15:1-6; Hebrews 11:1-3,8-16

CWZepp, BWCOB, August 7, 2016

...faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.

One of the most memorable cinematic moments of my youth occurred near the end of George Lucas and Steven Spielberg's classic *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* – the third of the original trilogy of adventures about the iconic adventurer and archaeologist Dr. Henry “Indiana” Jones.¹ Indy is passing through a series of booby traps guarding the final resting place of the Holy Grail. At the one legend called “The Path of God,” Indy finds himself emerging from a passageway in the wall of one cliff and staring at a dark hole leading to another in the face of an opposite cliff. Between the two openings in the cliffs, a vast chasm stretches as far he can see, with no bottom in sight. As he looks from the yawning darkness below to the carved image of a lion's head flanking the opening, Indy recalls the cryptic guidance his father had learned about how to successfully navigate the trap: “Only in the leap from the lion's head will he prove his worth.”

The chasm is, of course, much too wide for anyone to jump across, and too far even for Indy to use his famous whip to swing across. But Indy straightens himself up, fixes his eyes forward, and says to himself “It's a leap of faith...” Then with sweat pouring down his brow, he closes his eyes, takes a deep breath, puts out his foot, and propels himself out into the void. And wouldn't you know it – his foot lands upon a footbridge, miraculously camouflaged and invisible from above.

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For good or ill, that image of Indiana Jones is one of my first thoughts whenever I hear this verse of scripture. It was also quick to my mind when I learned about the opening of the Skywalk Bridge at the Grand Canyon – the horseshoe-shaped glass-bottomed walkway that juts out some 70 feet from the edge of the canyon. I have yet to visit it, but as I imagine what it would be like to walk on glass above and beyond the rim of the Grand Canyon, some 700 feet straight down (not to mention the roughly 3600 foot depth that isn't quite straight down!), my mental playback of that first “leap of faith” step of Indiana Jones across that invisible footbridge is probably the closest thing I can image.

It has been suggested that such glass bottomed bridges make for a good metaphor for faith, because walking on glass suggests that we can't see what supports us – thus “the conviction of things not seen.” But I am not so sure that I agree. For although that Indiana Jones scene came quickly to mind when I heard about the Grand Canyon Skywalk, there is a significant difference between Indy's journey and a trip to the Skywalk. We know the glass is there before we ever put foot upon it. In fact, the only reason we likely would venture to that particular spot along the Grand Canyon is to enjoy (or perhaps to successfully endure) the journey above the Canyon made possible by that bridge. Even if we have a paralyzing fear of heights, it doesn't so much require faith to move across such a bridge as it does courage. We aren't just hoping

¹ *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*. Paramount Pictures. 1989.

a bridge is there – we know it. We know it has been carefully constructed and inspected, designed to withstand extreme wind and earthquakes, tested to carry many, many times the weight and vibrations than it will ever see in its actual operation, and managed to ensure safety as the top priority.

But before his foot landed on the footbridge, Indy didn't know it was there. He had only an obscure legend suggesting that the chasm could be crossed by faith, and he could only hope for something beyond his sight to see him safely across to the other side. That changed after that first step. Once he knew about the illusion, it wasn't faith that moved him across the bridge. But that first step... it's not a bad way to conceptualize a leap of faith.

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Now in the church, when we speak of faith, our first thoughts probably shouldn't be about Indiana Jones, but rather Abraham and Sarah – those who have been called the father and mother of all those who have faith. So central is their story that followers of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam all trace their origins back to them – thus they are called the “Abrahamic Faiths.” Today's scripture from Hebrews is typical with its lifting up of Abraham as an archetype of faith: “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.”²

For me, it is that last phrase that captures the essence of faith. Faith is operative in the “not knowing” places of our lives – the times and the experiences and the situations that are beyond our ability to know or to control. Faith is experienced when we arrive at the end of the things we know, but we have to keep going anyway. Faith is required when our sight has become limited, and we need to journey into territory in which our vision is inadequate. Faith arises when we need to trust something – or someone – besides what we see and what we know.

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When I was a staff member for a summer at Shepherd's Spring Outdoor Ministries Center, I had a memorable experience one night when several of us found ourselves out on a trail after dark when our only flashlight failed. I am not really the outdoorsy type, so this was a new experience for me, and it was rather unnerving. So accustomed was I to using my sight to guide me that I was nearly in a panic thinking about how we were going to make it back to our cabin, which was still a long way off. But one of the other leaders was much calmer, and talked us through the journey. “You just need to trust something other than your eyes” he said. “As long as we are on the trail, we'll feel and hear the sound of the mulch under our feet if we are paying attention.” And so we joined together in a line, and carefully made our way forward along the trail. Step by step, we felt our way along, trusting our feet, trusting our ears, and trusting those in front of us to lead the way home.

That journey through the dark woods remains etched in my memory – and not just because of the adrenaline that was coursing through my veins that night (though that certainly helped to magnify the event!) But also because it taught me something about what it means to let go of that on which I previously depended – namely my sight – and to trust something else enough to keep moving forward. It was, in a very limited sense, an exercise in faith.

² Hebrews 11:8

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On another occasion, I found myself standing atop a 10-meter platform at a swimming pool to which I had been invited by a new friend of mine from the church I had recently started attending. That was way back when I actually liked to swim, but even then I was not what you would call “skilled” at aquatic activities. I was a competent swimmer, and I had mastered a mean cannonball. But I had no business whatsoever even standing on a 10-meter platform, let alone jumping off one. But my friend loved the high dive, and he kept urging me to give it a try. So, eager to please and to impress, I ascended the ladder to the top of platform, and prepared to “dive”.

Now, I suppose you could say that it took faith for me to jump off that platform and actually attempt to dive headfirst into the water 10-meters below. I, however, being familiar with the ending of this story, would suggest “stupidity” as more accurate description of my motivation. That and the willful ignoring of all the warnings I had ever been given about the dangers of peer pressure. I don’t remember much about what happened after I hit the water. That would be because the wind was completely knocked out of me following an epic belly flop.

Yes...*faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.* But it is not simply wishful thinking. Faith is trust *in* something or someone. For Indiana Jones, it was trust in a legend and his father’s research. For Abraham and Sarah, it was trust in the promises of God. For us...well, that is the question is it not?

For the the late great spiritual writer Henri Nouwen, his greatest revelation about faith came at, of all places, the circus. Nouwen had gone to see the German trapeze group "The Flying Rodleighs" perform. He was mesmerized by their breath-taking performance as they flew gracefully through the air. At the end of the show, he spoke with the leader of the troupe – Rodleigh himself. Nouwen asked him how he was able to perform with such grace and ease so high in the air. Rodleigh responded, “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.”³

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So often, we make the mistake of thinking that having faith means holding on to God. But the truth is that faith means letting go of everything to which we have been holding on, so that God can catch us. And faith comes most into focus when trouble comes – when things are the most out of our control, when everything we thought we knew comes crashing down around us.

Author Stan Purdum tells a story about his friends, Don and Nancy, that I want to share with you in his words:

³ Henri J.M. Nouwen, *The Only Necessary Thing: Living a Prayerful Life* (1999), pp.195-196. Quoted in the sermon “When Trouble Comes” by The Rev. Dr. Charles Reeb. Internet: http://day1.org/2109-when_trouble_comes

Several years ago, having no children of their own, [Don and Nancy] decided to adopt, and over the course of time, they welcomed three children into their home. Then, sometime later, Nancy experienced a mental collapse and entered a dark period of her own. Although she eventually recovered, she was not the same woman. She could no longer handle crowds and her emotional life remains precarious. Periodically, she has to return to the hospital to get herself stabilized again. Thus, most of the parenting falls on Don.

“At the time of my last contact with Don and Nancy,” Purdum says, “their two older children had done well, and were typical teenagers, but the third child, Michael, who came to Don and Nancy’s home at age 2½, brought very tough challenges. As he grew, he did not bond with his adoptive parents, seemed not to be guided by conscience, and had no concern about consequences of his actions. Eventually, his behavior became so bad that Don and Nancy had to have Michael institutionalized, and by the time I met Don, Michael was living with a professional parent. But still, Don visited him every Saturday.”

“How do you keep hope in God alive?” I asked Don one day.

“I don’t know. I guess I play the cards I was dealt,” he said quietly. Obviously, Don’s not a complainer, but that was not really his whole answer. In Sunday school class, he occasionally shared his worry and concern with a few of us. People in the class prayed for Don and his situation. People offered words of support. In short, Don didn’t keep his faith alive all by himself. The church community rallied around him and helped him nourish his faith. It’s not the only factor, but it is one that helps Don to not give up his faith...that keeps him believing that his life, and Nancy’s life, and his children’s lives – including Michael’s – are in God’s hands.⁴

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That is, in short, the essence of faith:

Trusting that our lives are in God’s hands...
 Trusting God to catch us when it feels like we are
 in free fall...
 Trusting God to be God.

And over the centuries, a great cloud of witnesses, from Abraham and Sarah to even Indiana Jones, have discovered and have given testimony that faith is enough.

May it be so...

⁴ Quoted in *Homiletics*. “Walking on Glass.” July-Aug. 2016. Vol. 28, No. 4, p. 48.