

“Trusting the God Who Carries Us”

By Elizabeth D. McLean, Prince of Peace Presbyterian Church

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Based upon Jeremiah 17:5-8; Acts 1:1-5

At some point in our lives, many of us did something that felt both scary and extraordinary. We climbed up onto a desk at school, a table at a retreat center, or in my case onto a bookcase at camp, turned our backs to the edge, crossed our arms across our chests, took a deep breath, and then allowed ourselves to fall backwards off the edge and down into the open arms of others waiting to catch us. So-called “trust falls” such as these are a staple in programs designed to build connections between strangers and friends, whether designed for youth or adults. When you have been safely caught in people’s arms, you realize in a visceral way that you are not alone, and after everyone has had a turn to feel the adrenaline rush of fear and the joy of being caught, that shared experience then creates a special bond between group participants.

But trust falls always take place in very controlled settings, so the trust they generate is, in some ways, more engineered than real. The person falling may not even know those catching him, and the catchers may not even really care about the person falling. Everyone is just following instructions in the moment. So, please do not try this on your own hoping that someone passing by will catch you! You could seriously hurt yourself, not to mention scare or hurt someone else; and all danger aside, trust falls are not really a good way to measure how trust-worthy the people around you are, nor do they prove who is the most trusting by nature and in what they trust. We can do a little experiment right now that can get at the latter, however. Look at this photo and ask yourself whether you trust human engineering enough that you would feel comfortable swimming in this glass pool suspended between buildings in London,¹ or walking out over the Grand Canyon on a glass observation bridge?² What about walking on this glass bridge in China known as the Dragon Cliff bridge, which is suspended 4,600 feet up on the cliff face of Tianmen Mountain?³ If you would be willing to try all of these because you trust in glass and steel and are game for adventure, then you are more trusting of human engineering than I am, (or at least less afraid of heights). But what about people? Are you so trusting of people that you would put your life in their hands outside of a trust fall?

In 1859, there was a famous French tightrope walker called the Great Blondin, who was the first ever to walk across a rope suspended over Niagara Falls.⁴ The distance was so great that the middle of the rope could not be secured with guy wires. This meant it sagged, and forced Blondin to descend 50 feet in the middle on a wobbly wire where the wind and spray were heaviest, before ascending again to get from the American side to the Canadian side. No one thought he could make it, but he did, and then proceeded to do it again and again so casually that he made it look easy. Once Blondin crossed the wire blindfolded; another time he did a head

¹ Slide of pool shown. [See](#)

<https://www.dezeen.com/2015/08/19/glass-bottomed-swimming-pool-arup-associates-nine-elms-south-london/>

² Slide shown. [See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grand_Canyon_Skywalk](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grand_Canyon_Skywalk)

³ Slide shown. https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202007/31/WS5f2349e9a31083481725d3e2_4.html

⁴ Abbot, Karen, “*The Daredevil of Niagara Falls*,” SMITHSONIAN MAGAZINE, Oct. 18, 2011; available at <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/the-daredevil-of-niagara-falls-110492884/>. The two images of Blondin’s act which were shown in worship were taken from this article.

stand; and still another time he even brought a little stove out and cooked himself an omelet in the middle. When he asked the crowd, who had been watching him do these stunts one day, if they believed he could successfully wheel a wheelbarrow across they cheered “Yes! We believe!” Then he asked, given their confidence in him, if any of them would be willing to ride in the wheelbarrow. That’s when the crowd went completely silent and suddenly became fascinated with their shoes.

Blondin’s question helps us to recognize that there is a difference between believing in something or someone, which we do with our minds, and trusting in something or someone, which requires a level of heart and soul and life investment that believing does not. You can believe in someone’s skills, and still not want to stake your life on them. Likewise, you can believe in God or church doctrine, but still not truly trust in God to take care of you. People do it all the time. But that doesn’t mean doing so is a good thing. Discipleship is supposed to be about much more than intellectually accepting doctrine or professing belief that Jesus Christ is Lord. It is supposed to be about trusting in God so deeply and completely, that even when the way forward is unknown or clearly precarious, and even when your current circumstances make you feel wobbly and endangered, you know that God is with you and will never let you go.

In the Old Testament, the Hebrew language makes this distinction clear. Whereas in English, when we say we “have faith in” a piece of engineering or in a person, that implies both believing and trusting, in Hebrew, there are two distinct words for these actions. *Emunah* in Hebrew means to have faith in the sense of “believe in” with your mind. *Bitachon* in Hebrew means “to trust.” This is the word Jeremiah uses in today’s Old Testament lesson. When he says, “Blessed are those who trust in the Lord, whose trust is the Lord,” he isn’t talking about people who believe that Yahweh exists. He is talking about people who derive their sense of security from Yahweh. You see, *bitachon* comes from the verb *batach*, which means “to lean or rest on something” which makes you feel secure. The implication of this leaning is that you do it without thinking; you trust so much in things or people that you take for granted that they will keep you safe.

Perhaps trying to build off of this implication, in modern Israel, the word *bitachon* is now associated with everything from security companies and checkpoints to the Ministry of Defense. But the wonderful irony in these appropriations of the term is that in the Bible, the word has a negative connotation whenever the object of trust is a human being, practice, or creation; it means having a false or unjustified sense of security.⁵ The only time *bitachon* has a positive connotation is when it is used in reference to God. That is why Jeremiah says, “Blessed are those who *trust in* the Lord, whose *trust is* the Lord.” (Italics mine.) When we lean on God, investing our lives in God’s way, it’s not just that we are saying that we trust God, we are also saying God is our source of security. We don’t even have to think about it; we just know that God will catch and carry us as needed.

⁵ Sinclair, Julian, “*Bitachon*,” THE JEWISH CHRONICLE, Nov., 4, 2008; retrieved from <https://www.thejc.com/judaism/jewish-words/bitachon-1.5923>

Jeremiah both believed and trusted in this truth, which is why he said that those who put their trust in mortals and material things are cursed to feel like parched shrubbery in the desert. He wasn't threatening that God would put a hex on the people. He was saying that whenever we choose to put our greatest trust in a penultimate power to give us security instead of the ultimate power, who is God, this is inevitable. All human beings or practices are finite and flawed. When we depend on God to make us secure, in contrast, we are investing in the one who is infinitely reliable and perfect. God has the power to make us feel like a tree growing by a stream, able to survive even in droughts, and to be fruitful even in difficulty. God is always worthy of trust, always steadfast in God's love for us. God doesn't promise that we will never experience pain or difficulty or loss. But God does promise that we will never be abandoned to fall on our backs or faces alone.

The first disciples ultimately learned this lesson very well, but they learned it the hard way. Before Jesus was crucified, he warned them that he was going to be gone for a while but he would return, and they didn't believe him. So, when he died, they were devastated and scared and locked themselves away from the world unsure how to proceed. Then Jesus returned, and according to Luke, visited with them in his risen form for 40 days. That's Bible-speak for a really long time. For days or weeks or months, they got to see him, actually lean on him, and learn from him in ways that they hadn't before he died, before they appreciated that they truly were in the presence of God. Accordingly, when the time came for Jesus to tell them, after those 40 days, that he was going to leave again to ascend to the Father, they believed him when he said he would not leave them orphaned. You can see it in the text we heard from *Acts*. Jesus said, "Wait here to receive the Spirit of God" and the disciples do just that. There is no hiding in the Ascension story, no whining about "Now what will we do?" "Wait for the Spirit; trust me," Jesus said, and the disciples did. If angels hadn't told them to stop staring at the sky and get on with their mission, they might have waited in that exact spot all the way until Pentecost. But once they were prompted to move, they still didn't flee. They went to Jerusalem and chose Matthias to replace Judas so they would be ready to go when the Spirit came.

"As swimmers dare/ to lie face to the sky/ and water bears them,/ as hawks rest upon air/ and air sustains them, so would I learn to attain/ freefall, and float/ into Creator Spirit's deep embrace," poet Denise Levertov prays in her poem called "*The Avowal*."⁶ This is really what faith is about, not just professing faith in Christ, but also learning to know and trust God enough so as to attain free fall, and float in God's grace in all circumstances. But reaching this level of trust doesn't happen overnight. You can't just say you believe in Jesus and suddenly find yourself in a place of such deep and abiding trust that your first thought is, "God's got this and me" when facing difficult challenges or an unknown future. Speaking as someone who knows anxiety all too well even after decades of discipleship, I know that it can be hard to trust in one you can't see, when you can see very clearly in your mind's eye all of the potential pitfalls and challenges that lie ahead. That doesn't mean achieving that kind of trust is impossible, however. Trust in the divine is something you can cultivate with the help of the Spirit.

⁶ See Levertov, Denise, "*The Avowal*," <http://www.inspirationalstories.com/poems/the-avowal-denise-levertov-poems>; see also Hamric, Beth, "*Freefalling in Grace*," in *WEAVINGS*, Vol. ZZIV, No. 2, March/April 2009, 30-35.

The first step in doing this is to do what the disciples did, focus on Jesus, who did everything that he said he would do, even the things that seemed impossible. He demonstrated with his very life both his trustworthiness and the depths of his care for us. Then he sent the Holy Spirit to continue his ministry, and comfort, guide, educate, and inspire us. Even if you can't always see or feel the Spirit or Christ's love, Scripture testifies to the steadfast love and abiding presence of God in our lives. Just knowing that can make free falling into God's grace feel safer.

The second step is taking what Jeremiah says very seriously. In his day, the people of Judah were still professing faith in Yahweh, still going through the motions of making sacrifices and repeating liturgy in worship, but their deepest trust was in things other than the Lord. They trusted themselves, their own plans, and their tribes more than God; they trusted their crooked kings' scheming to make them secure, and their Canaanite neighbors' wisdom in worshipping Baal to guarantee good crops. And again and again they discovered they weren't as secure as they had thought. Their experience serves as our warning. I'm not saying we should go through life trusting nothing and no one. Trust is essential to lasting and good human relationships as well as relationships with God. But if it is existential security that we are seeking, as Jeremiah said, then there is no greater source than God. So, ask yourself, what am I taking for granted as a sure source of security that might not be? In what or whom do I trust most and why? If it isn't God, it's time to nurture that relationship more.

The third way to attain free fall is about nurturing that relationship, but is a lesson we can actually learn from the Great Blondin. After he asked his audience who believed in him enough to ride in a wheelbarrow across the wire, the crowd went silent for a while. Then, finally, one man spoke up. It was his manager, Harry Colcord. But Blondin didn't immediately offer him the wheelbarrow and head out onto the wire. Instead, he returned a month later with him, opting to carry him on his back all the way across the wire instead of push him. I don't know all that they did in that intervening month to train for that astonishing moment of trust as well as skill. But Colcord later shared what Blondin said to him the day they went back to the wire, which reveals a lot of what they were probably working on in that month. When he walked out on the wire with Colcord on his back, Blondin paused for a moment at each point where the guy ropes joined the main cable because the line was steadier at those points. At the last resting point before they reached the middle, wobbly span, he yelled above the roar of the water and wind, "Harry, you are no longer Colcord; you are Blondin. Until I clear this place be a part of me— mind, body, and soul. If I sway, sway with me. Do not attempt to do any balancing yourself. If you do, we shall both go down to our death."⁷ Colcord did as he said and told people afterwards it was like riding a piece of marble, so solid and sure was Blondin on that rope.

In order to free fall and float in God's grace, or in order to stay securely on the wire— choose the metaphor that speaks to you most— we have to strive to make ourselves one with God in this way, letting go of both control and fear. Instead of trying to steer God, or balance ourselves, or set the pace, we have to let God do these things. "Wait for the Spirit," Jesus said, and the disciples did. They gave themselves over to God's timing and God's plan with the confidence of those who knew through the risen Christ that one way or the other they would be

⁷ *Ibid*, "The Daredevil of Niagara Falls."

all right and everything would work out as it should. And the Spirit came and helped them do amazing things.

“Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not rely on your own insight,” Proverbs advises. “In all your ways acknowledge him and he will make straight your paths.” (Prov. 3:5-6). As we move step by step into a post-pandemic world, in our own lives and in the church, know that God is with you. Ground your sense of security in God’s promises and Godself and strive to be carried in the Spirit’s embrace this summer and beyond. There is no safer or more blessed place to be - thanks be to God. Amen.