

THE ADVENTURE OF FAITH

Comedian Jerry Seinfeld once said, “Life is like a carnival ride. We’re all strapped in and once it starts, no one can stop it. As you spin through each passage, from youth to adulthood to old age, sometimes you put your arms up and scream, and sometimes you just hang on tightly to that bar in front of you.

“But the ride’s the thing. That’s what living is about. I think the most you can hope for at the end of your life is that your hair’s messed up, you’re out of breath, and you didn’t throw up.”

That might not be a bad description of the life of faith—in ideal terms, of course, because there doesn’t seem to be a whole lot of people who get all excited and out of breath about being a Christian. And excitement certainly isn’t the message mainline churches like ours communicate to other people. I mean, when you invite someone to come here to the First Congregational Church of Scarborough, do you say to them, “Come to our church and get your hair messed up!”?

I’m guessing not. You might tell people about our wonderful music with groups like the choir and the *Singers and Stringers*, or how warm and friendly and welcoming our parishioners are, but you probably wouldn’t say to those you invite to come here, “Hold on to your hats! You’re in for a wild ride!” No, the message most mainstream Christian churches send to people is, “Come to our church, where you’re not likely to get your feathers ruffled.”

I read a story about an Episcopal priest who was shopping for a *Harley Davidson* motorcycle. Now, be honest. When I said that, wasn’t your first thought along the lines of, “Really? A priest interested in buying a *Harley Davidson* motorcycle?” At the very least it sounds unusual, doesn’t it?

So, this Episcopal priest walked into a *Harley Davidson* motorcycle dealership, but he didn’t look like a priest. He was “out of uniform,” so to speak. He was dressed in “civilian clothes” instead of a clerical collar. A salesperson walked up to him as he was looking at a particular motorcycle and said, “That’s a really nice machine.” And he went on to brag about its speed, its ability to accelerate rapidly, the excitement he would feel when he opened up the throttle on the open road, and how women loved to ride on the back of them.

Then the salesperson found out the guy he was trying to sell the

motorcycle to was a minister. Immediately his language and tone of voice changed. He spoke softly about what good mileage the motorcycle got, the various features that made it a safe bike to drive, and how practical it was for trips around town.

Now, I don't know if the minister ended up purchasing that motorcycle—the story never said—although I'd love to believe he did buy it. But these are some of the reflections he had about his experience at the *Harley Davidson* shop. “Have we somehow told the world that being a Christian is more like riding a lawnmower than a motorcycle? Is the life of faith more safe and sound, rather than dangerous and exciting? The common image of the church is pure lawnmower—slow, deliberate, and plodding. But I wonder if the Lord sees our task to be more like taking the church out on the open road, giving it the gas, and seeing what the old baby will do.”

You know, as a culture, we're big believers in stable security. We believe in home ownership and steadily rising property values. We believe in low-risk, broad-based investment portfolios that, even though they have returns only slightly higher than the market in general, at least won't cause us to lose our shirts if stock prices plunge.

We teach our children how important it is to succeed in school because the surest path for their stable success is through education—entrance to a reputable college, and maybe after that, graduate school. Then, if they keep their nose to the grindstone and steadily forge ahead, the skills they have developed and the people they meet will open the doors of vocational opportunity.

We believe in insurance to protect us against unexpected risks, like a health crisis, getting in an automobile accident, or having our house burn to the ground. We believe in organization, planning for the future and setting focused, doable goals. And we believe in encouraging all these values in our kids and grandkids. We believe that if we can get our children to the point that their lives are settled and they're self-reliant by the time they turn 25, we've done our job as parents and grandparents and can breathe a huge sigh of relief.

I suspect that this stability and security that our culture has so deeply and strongly instilled in us has spilled over into our lives as Christians. We play it safe. We look for the most surefooted, risk-free way to love and serve God. Which puts us in a well-worn, going through the motions kind of faith routine where, for the most part we think only about getting the job done as quickly and efficiently as possible.

The problem is, although technically we're being faithful and are in fact

accomplishing something for God, spiritually speaking, we're yawning. We're, dare I say it, bored, lukewarm, apathetic followers of Christ and people of God.

Let me ask you, hypothetically, of course, some questions about your faith.

Are you emotionally invested in your life as a Christian?

Are you fully engaged in the work of the church and the ministry of Jesus Christ to which you have been called?

As a Christian, would you describe yourself more as being spiritually alive, or spiritually sedated?

Would you describe your faith as adventurous, or tedious?

In this morning's reading from the book of Isaiah, the prophet had a vision of the Lord, seated on his heavenly throne, in all of God's heavenly magnificence and splendor. Six-winged Seraphim-angels were gathered around the Lord with their eyes covered as they sang, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory."

After Isaiah's moment of fear, insecurity and feelings of unworthiness, standing before the Almighty, he was purified by a hot coal and had his sins taken away so he would be found acceptable in God's sight. And then Isaiah heard God speak these words to him—a call to service.

"I heard the voice of the Lord saying, 'Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?'" And Isaiah responded, "Here I am. Send me!"

Don't you find that response stunning? I feel like saying, "Wait a minute, Isaiah. What are you doing? Yes, the Lord is calling you, but you don't even know what it is you're signing up for! Ask some questions. 'Send me where, Lord? What is it you want me to do? How long will I be gone? And what about my family and friends? Won't you at least give me an opportunity to say goodbye to them before I head off to who knows where to do who knows what for who knows how long?'"

Poor, ignorant Isaiah. The Lord asks him in the vaguest possible terms to leave his old life behind and head into an unknown future. Where to? I guess Isaiah trusts that God will show him. Why is God calling him? It seems he's not worrying about that right now. Perhaps God will tell him at some future time. What does God want from him? Only God knows. But that's good enough for Isaiah.

I ask you, is that any way to live a life of faith? With whole pages in God's plan book simply blank? With no opportunity to compare notes with the Lord and have at least a small say in his divine call? With no chance to at least sit down at the dining room table and write out a pro and con list about what God is asking him to do?

It would seem not. God posted a help wanted ad without the hint of a job description, and Isaiah simply said, “That’s just the job I’m looking for. I don’t know if I’m qualified. I don’t know what the boss’s expectations of me are going to be. I don’t know what the pay scale is. But, hey, it sounds great!”

“Here am I. Send me!”

The fact is, just as it was for the prophet Isaiah, all significant acts of faith are a step into the great, unknown future. Is that scary? Most definitely. But on the other hand, in a positive sense, such significant acts of faith, such steps into the great, unknown future with God as our co-pilot, are also moments when we most fully come alive as Christians. Acts of faith that involve some risk cause us to tingle a bit from nerves, because who knows what God is getting us into? And if we were to step back and look at the whole picture rationally and objectively, we probably wouldn’t do it.

But there are times when God’s call to us comes unexpectedly, out of the blue, while we’re right in the thick of things. We can’t think, perhaps because there isn’t time to think. There’s only time enough for us to make a decision, to choose not whether we will respond to God’s call, but how to respond to God’s call.

And when that call comes to us, either we just do it, or we don’t. Either we say, “Here am I. Send me!” Or we say “Don’t look at me, Lord. Send someone else.”

Maybe you’re thinking that you have to be someone very special, someone with extraordinary faith, to be able to say to God, “Here am I. Send me!” when so much is unknown and the risks might be great. Maybe you’re thinking that Isaiah had something—a very deep and abiding trust in the Lord—that you don’t have. Or at least you don’t have as much of it.

Maybe you’re wondering what’s inside people like Isaiah that allows them to risk it all and step out in faith the way they do. And maybe you’re thinking, “I wish I had some of that.” But let me remind you that most of the Biblical characters who were drafted into the adventure of faith, when they were first called by the Lord, had no more faith than we do. And who knows? They may even have had less faith than us.

Abraham and Sarah, who were a very ordinary, elderly couple, were called by God to leave behind the safety and security they had known for so long and risk traveling afar to reach a new and unknown land God wanted them to go to.

Mary, was a poor handmaiden, and Joseph, her husband, was a simple carpenter. In other words, they were the kind of people you normally don’t hear anything about. But God called them to be parents to the long-awaited

Messiah that God's people had been waiting centuries for.

Moses, King David, Ruth, Esther—there was nothing in any of their biblical stories to suggest they were more pious, prayed harder, or had some unique divine connection that the rest of us don't have. And actually, the Bible seems to go out of its way to suggest the exact opposite. All of them—and I would include Isaiah in this observation, as well—but all of those individuals I mentioned were just trying to get on with their lives like the rest of us, making it through day by day, when suddenly, in a very unexpected, uninvited, unanticipated way, they were called to make a decision, to take a risk, to open the door and walk into the unknown future. And every one of them did it. Sometimes without any hesitation, the way Isaiah did; and sometimes very reluctantly, like, say, Moses.

When God called Moses, God got an earful of excuses, complaints and whining. Moses gave God every excuse he could possibly think of as to why he shouldn't be the one to go to Pharaoh and plead God's case to free God's people as God told him to do. But in the end, Moses went. He did it.

I don't know if you've ever thought about just how risky faith might actually be. God might call us to do things that are filled with uncertainty and possible hazards and perils. But at the same time, my friends, faith can be an adventure. And adventure is the spice of life. I think Helen Keller got it right when she wrote, "Life is either a daring adventure, or nothing." Legendary hockey player Wayne Gretzky put it this way: "You miss 100% of the shots you never take."

And Mark Twain once said, "Twenty years from now, you will be more disappointed by the things you didn't do than by the ones you did."

With those quotes in mind, and with Isaiah's courageous response to the Lord in our hearts, wouldn't it be to our benefit—and to God's—to understand our faith and God's call to do God's will as an adventure, in which we and God walk into the unknown future together? And even if we don't know what tomorrow will bring, we can trust and be thankful that the Lord knows.

The question we need to wrestle with is, even though the Lord knows what tomorrow will bring, will that be enough to move us to take an adventure of faith and respond to God's call the way Isaiah did when he said, "Here I am. Send me!"

May those be our words, as well, when the Lord calls us. Amen.