

# Faith Journey - What's Next?

Hebrews 11:1-2 NIV

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Some people say it takes more faith to be an atheist than a Christian. Some atheists take offense at that, but one thing is true - to be an atheist requires certainty.

**Today I want us to explore the question: What is the difference between certainty and confidence?**

Certainty and confidence are synonyms so they share a similar definition. Today I am using certainty in the context of what we believe to be true; doctrinal truth, for example, or our certainty that how WE do church is the best and maybe only way to do church.

Certainty as I am defining it here, sets in early: certainty about life and God, politics and religion, good and bad, values and morals - these crystalize while we are young into a world view. Most people rest comfortably in their certainty. Once decided, they resist any ideas that challenge them to grow or change their worldview unless forced to by extreme circumstances.

I am using confidence to refer to what motivates us, to what gets us to leave our seats and participate - join the day. Confidence lets us live openly and inclusively in a way that invites the world to come meet God with us.

That's the problem with certainty - it may not leave room for openness to new ideas and new ways of doing things. We must be open to new conversations if we are going to grow. Certainty ends the conversation. Certainty is about convincing rather than conversing. Certainty is about converting rather than communing.

We need to replace complacent certainty that we already know all we need to know and are doing all we need to do; with confidence and courage that leads us to the places and possibilities a faith journey will take us.

Today we take our scripture reading from what may be the most recognized scripture about **faith**. *Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see. 2 This is what the ancients were commended for.*

The previous chapters in the book of Hebrews tell the story of why we can have confidence in Christ. As we read past these verses, we see the evidence for our hope in the testimony of the faithful like Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Moses.

Why did the writer write this letter? Because the Jewish Christians were discouraged and losing hope as the world around them grew more hostile and less familiar. The Hebrew Christians were filled with anxiety about the future. Certainty about doctrine was not the issue. They needed confidence in order to act on their faith.

In our Scripture, the Hebrew writer speaks of confidence. What he speaks of is confidence that we can trust Christ in all things. We can trust Jesus.

Everyone who participates in our consumer economy has a FICO or Credit Score. Your Credit Score measures things about your borrowing and consumer history that says something about your ability to repay and the integrity of your promise to repay. A high Credit Score says your promise to repay debt is probably good. You can be trusted.

*So in a sense, a Credit Score is a measure of integrity and ability to repay debt.*

**What credit score would you give Jesus? Is Christ overpromising when he says we can trust him to forgive our sins? Can we place our confidence in Him to show us how we should live our lives?**

I am reminded of the instance in which Jesus tells the paralyzed man, his sins are forgiven. When challenged by the religious leaders, Jesus said: "Which is easier: to say, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up and walk'? But I want you to know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins." So he said to the paralyzed man, "I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home," Luke 5:23-24, NIV.

You see the difference? Most of our certainty about doctrine relates to a future promise – that Christ paid the debt for our sins and we will one day reap a heavenly reward. We find it difficult to believe that His promises are for us today, in this moment. We lack the confidence to trust Jesus that He will show us the way we are to live today. Yet that is exactly the promise we have in Jesus, that he is our LIVING Savior, a presence in our lives today, in this very moment.

**Our struggle is not with certainty, but our struggle is with confidence.**

Most who attend church believe well. We don't really struggle with doctrinal doubt. Our struggle is on an emotional level with confidence in the midst of the uncertainties of life.

Here's what I mean: If each of you were asked do you believe in the fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith such as "do you believe Jesus was resurrected," or "do you believe Jesus is God's Son both human and divine," most if not all of us would say "yes, I have faith - I do not doubt these truths."

But most of the time in the Bible when faith is attributed to God's people, it is not a reference to their orthodoxy, or what they believe; it has to do with orthopraxy, or what they do. Faith motivated Noah to build an ark and save his family. Faith moved Abraham to leave his father and family and journey into an unknown land. Faith marked Moses' journey from Pharaoh's house to the desert leading the Hebrews to wander a generation before gaining the Promised Land – something Moses himself missed.

*In spite of uncertainty in their circumstances, confidence in God led Abraham, Moses and others to live out their faith in dynamic action.*

*It took great imagination.*

North Carolina preacher Will Willimon said in his blog, The Peculiar Prophet:

“The Bible is a book of the imagination.” (Harvard’s Peter Gomes). One reason why Peter is such a great preacher, and biblical interpreter, is that he has a fertile imagination. It is as if Scripture has as its purpose to stoke, to fund, and to fuel the imagination, thereby to make available to us a new heaven and a new earth.

Do you hear that? Does that give you some clue as to why we would call our First Baptist Church Jefferson City Spiritual Discernment process “Imagine if ...?”

Willimon goes on to say, “Too often we preachers think that our job is to take a biblical text and narrow the possibilities of that text ... reduce it to the one authoritative, right interpretation. More creative, and perhaps more faithful, biblical interpretation and exhortation seeks to multiply the possibilities, to open up new perspectives, and to help us see something that we would not have seen without the imaginative stimulation of Scripture.”

This spring, I completed the 40 days of prayer emphasis. The very first thing I learned was that doubt and fear were the main things preventing me from confidently following Jesus. I’ve been a Christian for 45 years. But I have to confess that not every day have I been willing or even able to say “I am all in!” My daily prayer has become: “God, I put aside any doubts and fears that would prevent me from completely trusting you today.” Lately, my prayer has added the component of imagination: “God, help me imagine what you want my life to be, my CHURCH to be.”

**We must keep learning to trust God by faith as we go through life. We must employ everything at our disposal to do so including our imagination - especially our imagination.**

Blaise Pascal, the 17<sup>th</sup> Century mathematician, physicist, inventor, writer and Christian philosopher, wagered at the beginning of the Enlightenment, that though you cannot prove, nor can you disprove the existence of God by reason, when you weigh the consequences of each, accepting that God exists and the responsibility to God that belief entails is the best bet. If you believe and it turns out God doesn't exist, you lose nothing. If you do not believe and God DOES exist, you lose EVERYTHING.

Brian McLaren takes a cue from Blaise Pascal when he challenges Christians to quit treating faith like it is hypothetical to our real lives - all about the hereafter rather than this very afternoon. He says we are on a journey. Life is not planning a trip. Life is not dreaming about some day. We are already embarked on the journey.

We need to pay attention. The ship has sailed, the train left the station, and we've got to decide will we trust God for the journey or not? My bets are with God, not without, which is basically what Pascal's Wager is about - *I'm betting not only on God's existence, but on His active participation in His world, and ultimately in my world.*

We find ourselves in uncharted waters.

People are living longer. Life span in 1900 was 49. In Biblical times it was more like 25. Now it's 90. People born today may live past 100. What does it look like to live such a long life of faith? Can church designed for another lifespan meet the challenges we face now and in the future? Imagine if we saw the challenges of an aging congregation as an opportunity. Imagine if we unapologetically embraced the wealth of wisdom, energy and resources that reside in our aging congregations.

What about the makeup of our churches? Our society is more diverse than ever in ethnicity, race, nationality and other ways. Can our faith allow us to embrace that diversity? Imagine if we let go of the apartheid models that segregate our congregations into homogeneous groups; Caucasians here, African Americans over there, Korean over there. Imagine if we boldly embraced diversity, and inclusiveness - something that seems to more like Jesus would do than the way we do.

Imagine if we were less certain about which pew is ours and more confident about inviting others to share our pew. Imagine if we were less certain about how to do church and more certain about why we are here in the first place. Imagine if we were less certain that our way is the best way to do church, and more certain about what the church should do. The church in America is going through drastic change. Reports of the church's demise are exaggerated, but hold the grain of truth that its existence is fragile. While the church in America is anemic, new ways of doing church offer glimpses of hope for Christianity in the northern hemisphere. At the same time, the church seems to be flourishing like never before in history across the southern hemisphere.

What about the impact of changing technology, of shifting demographics, of a fickle global economy, and the list goes on and seems to grow each day with the latest news.

Imagine if we behaved in confidence that we serve a savior who wants us to see these things as opportunities not obstacles. After all, isn't that the promise of the resurrection set against the stark reality of the cross - that in the finality of the crucifixion, we find the opportunity and hope of the resurrection.

So I ask you, do we want to be people of fear or faith?

**We are called to be people of faith.** Hebrews describes our forbearers of Faith, all on a journey, holding onto a promise based on who God is. What are the characteristics of people of faith? For Noah - perseverance. For Joshua and Caleb - courage. For Paul - boldness. The list goes on but the one common characteristic of the Faith of the Saints is trust. Ultimately faith is about trusting God. Do you? I mean really trust God.

**We are called to be on a faith journey.** Use your imagination with me for a moment. Maybe for you, your journey feels like a ship on a fast-moving ocean current. For others, your journey takes you through calm waters. Still others may not even perceive movement like a tent staked out on a glacier. What is a glacier but a sea of ice that is moving across the landscape carving out a new horizon as it goes.

Let's also imagine that our faith is small, no more than a speck, like a seed cast on the waves. What did Jesus say about faith; that if you have faith like a mustard seed, the smallest of seeds; you will do what? Move mountains? We are on a journey - embarked on an ocean. Whether sailing the crest of ocean waves or riding the glacial crust of a sea of ice, either way we are riding something that moves mountains.

God moves mountains. That's what he does. Look at his handiwork. What about the mountains in your life. Are there blocks of ice weighing heavy on your heart, leaving you frozen in your steps? Are you holding stubbornly to the past for fear of what the future may bring? What is it you fear that keeps you from enjoying and embarking on your journey of faith?

The Bible says to cast your bread on the water. And what? It will come back to you. You have got to let go and trust God will take care of you no matter where the faith journey takes you.

The following is a passage from the book "Tuesdays with Morrie," by Mitch Albom:

"On this day, Morrie says that he has an exercise for us to try. We are to stand, facing away from our classmates, and fall backward, relying on another student to catch us. Most of us are uncomfortable with this, and we cannot let go for more than a few inches before stopping ourselves. We laugh in embarrassment.

Finally, one student, a thin, quiet, dark-haired girl whom I notice almost always wears bulky, white fisherman sweaters, crosses her arms over her chest, closes her eyes, leans back, and does not flinch, like one of those Lipton tea commercials where the model splashes into the pool.

For a moment, I am sure she is going to thump on the floor. At the last instant, her assigned partner grabs her head and shoulders and yanks her up harshly.

“Whoa!” several students yell. Some clap. Morrie finally smiles. “You see”, he says to the girl, “you closed your eyes. That was the difference. Sometimes you cannot believe what you see. You have to believe what you feel. And if you are ever going to have other people trust you, you must feel that you can trust them too - even when you're in the dark. Even when you're falling.” - *falling girl* Source: “*Tuesdays With Morrie*” by Mitch Albom

The writer of Hebrews assures his audience they can trust Christ, who is interceding for them with their God who was and is faithful. He says the same for us today.

The miracle according to my Prof. from seminary, David Garland, is not the life suddenly transformed in the crisis of character such as the repentant alcoholic but rather the true miracle is the faithful life quietly lived over the length of a lifetime. Such a life is lived by faith, trusting in God “even when you’re in the dark. Even when you’re falling.”