

In May of last year, a man who ventured out on a glass-bottom bridge in China was left clinging to the side of it for dear life, after gale-force winds blew away some floor panels, leaving gaping holes in the structure hundreds of feet above the ground. As you can imagine, the harrowing event spurred a frantic attempt to save the man, whom the authorities did not identify. Thankfully he was able to inch his way to safety, helped or coaxed by a rescue crew.

The skywalk was suspended some 325 feet above a canyon floor in central China. Think about the height of *10* feet. Think about the height of a high diving board. It's high. Now think *three ... hundred ... and twenty-five feet* above a canyon floor, and you're standing on a plate of glass suspended in midair, and suddenly winds begin tearing the glass panels away!

The harrowing episode left many tourists deeply rattled, spurring discussions about what could have been a nightmarish ending, and raising questions about the safety of many of the country's glass bridges, walkways and viewing decks. Even before the windstorm, people were uneasy crossing the bridge -- a bridge of nothing. A bridge of air. The glass creates an illusion that you're walking in space with nothing to support you. Yet, you don't fall. Gravity is thwarted by a pane of glass beneath your feet.

The whole idea is to let visitors see the depths below them, and for those who try it, it takes a lot of courage to venture out. Some people *get* on their hands and knees and crawl across. Others *grab the side cables* and shuffle their grasp of the cables as they inch across. Some others *walk confidently* -- but fast, preferring to get across as soon as possible. Sort of describes how many of us shuffle along in our walk with God, doesn't it?

Glass-bottomed bridges are a good metaphor for faith. Faith is "the conviction of things not seen," declares the author of Hebrews in our second lesson

this morning. And walking on glass means we're not seeing that which supports us. What we *are* seeing are the dangers below, and they can be terrifying. So, we grasp the "cables" that give us comfort as we read (God's word), or perhaps we crawl on our knees, heads bowed in (prayer).

Our faith in Christ is like that, isn't it? Especially these days, when what we can see beneath our faith can make us wonder, just how substantial such trust is. For example, we look down and see many other people who seem quite content to carry on with life without commitment to any being higher than themselves, and they appear to be getting along all right. Perhaps it crosses our minds that by trying to live righteously, we're missing out on something.

We can also "see" the arguments of *atheism* that have grown more boisterous in recent years, and which today are put forward by some eloquent spokespersons. Those arguments can be persuasive, and perhaps it crosses our mind that we are being naïve to ignore them. We can see our *doubts* as well. They sometimes dance before our eyes when we're struggling to walk by faith.

What's more, we can view certain Christian *doctrines* -- such as the idea that Christ was raised from the dead, that God's kingdom will come and those who receive Christ will have eternal life -- and realize that we can't prove such things. The apostle Paul, writing to the Corinthians, voiced how such a line of thought goes: "If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have died in Christ have perished. If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied." Or, as *The Message* Bible paraphrases those last words, "If all we get out of Christ is a little inspiration for a few short years, we're a pretty sorry lot."

So, as people of faith, sometimes we feel like Peter walking on water; sometimes we feel like Peter sinking in the waves. Faith, sometimes, can feel like following the unseen into the unknown. Our text from Hebrews today speaks of

what we see and what we don't: "By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible."

We can find comfort and hope from the fact that we can be so easily misled by what we see. We can misunderstand the nature of almost anything, and any person, when we are working from just the externals. Conclusions based on external information, or impressions, will more often prove wrong than right, and can lead us to invest ourselves in that which has no real substance.

We can also take some comfort and hope from the fact that faith, is a way of seeing which looks beyond appearances. Abraham is a case in point: He "looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God." Abraham wasn't looking with his physical eyes, of course, but with the eyes of faith. In other words, faith is not something we somehow drum up with gumption, by stifling the clamor of doubts and other voices in our lives. Rather, faith is a way of seeing that what's under our feet, though it appears transparent, is actually the solid rock of Christ.

One of the means the writer of Hebrews uses to drive home his argument for faith is to give a lengthy list of examples -- a "hall of fame list" as it were -- of people from Israel's history who, through faith, acted in ways that showed they trusted God. They did this without really understanding that their actions were generated by great faith. They simply believed, trusted God, and got on with it. They didn't temporize, agonize, or rationalize. They simply got it done.

Noah builds the ark. Abraham leaves for a new country. Moses leads Israel out of bondage. Rahab shelters some Hebrew spies. David kills a giant. Isaac, Jacob, Sarah, Samson, Gideon, Samuel -- same thing. Apparently, No big deal.

The New Interpreter's Bible, reflecting on Hebrews 11, explains: "The use of a life, or an act, as an example must always be a reflection on a life, or an act, *that*

was not intended to be an example but had its own reasons, its own integrity. No one in the list of exemplars of faith I just mentioned lived his or her life as an example to anyone; their having done so would have disqualified them as good examples. It is because they lived out of their own faith, without an eye for an audience, that they are examples to us!!!"

With that stipulation in mind, I'm guessing most of us, if not all of us, can probably think of people we've met during our own walks with God who exemplify faith, but who'd be surprised that they provide an example of it. At the very first congregation I served a ministry coordinator named Devra, was one of those types of individuals. She has an uncanny ability of trying and implementing new ministry programs. A few years ago, Devra was willing to follow where God was leading her, was open to trying new things, and by doing so she led others through an education process called, "Faith Walk." Numerous people who went through the program grew closer to Christ and to other members of the church, and they were either baptized or they affirmed their baptisms.

Stan Purdum, author of *New Mercies I See, He Walked in Galilee*, tells the story of Don and his wife Nancy. Several years ago, having no children of their own, they decided to adopt, and over the course of time, they welcomed three children into their home. These were kids from other countries where their future otherwise would likely have been bleak for them.

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 remained precarious. Periodically, she had to return to the hospital to get herself stabilized again. Thus, most of the parenting fell on Don.

"At the time of his 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 and had no concerns regarding the consequences of his actions. Eventually, his behavior became so bad that Don and Nancy had to have Michael institutionalized, and, by the time Stan met Don, Michael was living with a professional parent. But still, Don visited him every Saturday." One day Purdum eventually asked Don, "How do you keep hope in God alive?" He responded quietly, "I don't know. I guess play the cards I was dealt."

Obviously, Don's not a complainer, but that was not really his whole answer. In his Sunday school class, he occasionally shared his worry and concern with others. 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."

I'm sure we can all identify with this family's story. I know that I most certainly can. There have been times when life has handed me grief and challenges that I wasn't sure I could handle. Whether it was the death of my mom to cancer when I was in my early twenties, my open-heart surgery when I was serving at Holy Spirit in Las Vegas, or my recent divorce. Throughout each of these immensely difficult circumstances I found myself clinging to my faith in God's love and mercy, as I'm sure you have at times as well!

That's kind of like walking across a **glass bridge** of faith! We may be fully conscious of the dangers below us, but we will crawl on our knees, or shuffle, or jog across them in our walk with Jesus. And regardless of whatever hazards we see, or the ones we don't see, we trust God will not let us down; he will carry our

burdens, we can lean on him, he is the rock that we can stand upon when everything around us appears to be sinking sand. And over the centuries, millions of people have discovered that faith is enough, that God is the tangible surface of the path of life. And Thanks be to God for that. Amen.