

Ready. Set. Go!

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READINGS

Selections from Matthew, Mark and Luke

I've chosen as my scripture several lines from throughout the Gospels of Mathew, Mark and Luke that are connected by a common theme. See if you can pick up on the common thread.

From Matthew:

- *And when Jesus finished these sayings, the crowds were amazed by his teaching, for he taught them as one who had authority.... (7: 28)*
- *And when the disciples heard this, they fell on their faces, and were filled with awe. (17:6)*
- *And when the crowd heard it, they were astonished at his teaching. 22:33*

From Mark:

- *And they were all amazed, so that they questioned among themselves, saying, "What is this? A new teaching?" 1:27*
- *And he got into the boat with them and the wind ceased. And they were utterly astounded. 6:51*
- *And they were astonished beyond measure, saying, 'He has done all things well; he even makes the deaf hear and the dumb speak.' 7:37*

From Luke:

- *And amazement seized them all, and they glorified God and were filled with awe, saying, "We have seen strange things today." 5:26*
- *And all were astonished with the majesty of God. 9:43*

Filled with awe. Amazed, astounded, and astonished, at what God had done through Jesus and the Spirit in their midst. I chose this selection of readings because I knew I'd be feeling these things today and I hope you are, too. As my beloved friend and spiritual teacher Rev. Liz Walker who is here with us today likes to say: "Look at God!" Just look at the Life God has let there be in this house! And listen to God! Just hear the sounds of God's grace – from the choir and Peter, from our hymns, and from what we will soon hear from Issa! It's astounding, really, and all thanks be to God, and to this wonderfully vibrant community of faith. And with that note of gratitude, let me begin today with an all-time favorite line from one of my all-time favorite authors, Annie Dillard. Near the end of her Pulitzer-winning book, *A Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, she writes the following: "I think the dying pray at the last not "please," but "thank you" as a guest thanks his host at the door. Falling from airplanes the people are crying, thank

you, thank you, all down the air; and the cold carriages draw up for them on the rocks.” What an image! What an aspiration!

As some of you know, when I was in my twenties, I jumped out of an airplane, for fun, in Switzerland. I was with a dear childhood friend on a trip just after I graduated from Div. School. We had both long wondered what it would be like and couldn't imagine a more beautiful place amidst the towering peaks of the Eiger, Monch and Jungfrau in the majestic Swiss Alps. It was a tandem jump, and yes, it helped to know that the person strapped to my back was a Swiss Army-trained parachuter with more than 400 jumps to his name. During our 20-minute pre-flight instruction in a hangar on a tiny, soon-to-be postage stamp-sized airfield just outside of Interlaken, we were told: “Whatever you do, keep your arms folded across your chest when you jump out of the plane. This will allow the instructor to maneuver you into the proper free fall position.”

Soon we were crammed into the back of a compact, single-engine, jump plane, sitting on the floor right behind the pilot. My heart started pumping as the plane made its ascent to over 10,000 feet. The door wasn't even open, but I was already waiting for the words of the body-rocking three count we practiced back at the hangar. [Arms folded and rocking back and forth] “Ready. Set. Go.” I looked out the window to see that the surrounding peaks were now at eye level. A few minutes later, the pilot signaled it was time and my partner who I was already attached inched the two of us to the door.

What happened next was a surprise to us both. I was still psyched to go but my hand instinctively reached up to brace myself against the doorframe. The instructor gently grabbed it and pulled it back to my chest. “Arms crossed,” he told me. “Right! Got it!” I said. He then opened the door; the wind came rushing in and once again my arm went straight for the doorframe, with magnetic force. “Arms crossed,” he yelled in my ear with a chuckle. “Right. Got it.” Again, he reached for my arm, and again he brought it to my chest before letting go to do a final equipment check. I'm sure this happened once or twice more until he grabbed my arm for the last time. “Got it.” I said, as he started rocking us both with the three words. “Ready!” This time, I really did get it. “Set!” My arms stayed crossed. “Go!”

By the time we jumped my arms were tucked in so tight that we did what I later found out was an unusual full front flip out of the plane. When he finally got our bodies into position, he shouted into my ear that I could now let my arms go, so I spread them out wide and down we went for a full 35 seconds of wind-breaking, breath-taking, face-flattening free fall. 35 seconds! Until we pulled the cord. When we did, the chute billowed out above, caught the air and jerked our bodies to what felt like a complete stop. After making sure everything was still attached, including my cheeks, I lifted my goggles and began to take in what was by far the most spectacular view of God's creation I had and have ever seen. And for close to 7 minutes, we gently fell through the sky, in silent, awe-filled bliss. The only interruption was the occasional compulsion I felt to look down at my sneakers and realize, with fear and giddy joy, that there was nothing underneath them for still thousands of feet. We landed safely on a grassy field without a cold carriage in sight.

The experience was among the most incredible of my life, but I have to say in all honesty, jumping out of an airplane ain't nothing compared to this leap, and to this letting go. I've been bracing [arm up], maybe some of you have too, if not with this transition then maybe with some other life transition, loss or new life you are facing. And I've been returning, repeatedly, to the wisdom of Annie Dillard. It's been an awesome, sometimes scary rush, the feeling of being held aloft in a steady air stream of gratitude, and yet at the core of it all there is the amazing, astounding, astonishing grace of letting go!

Yes, as I've begun my roll out of this high-flying place, by all means, it's "thank you!" Thank you, First Church! And thank you God, as a guest thanks the host at the door! That's it. *And ...there's s a deeper learning still, implied by Dillard's powerful words, that we are all always being hosted, welcomed and held through all our ups and downs! And therein lies the precious invitation of grace and the practice of letting go!*

Of course, this is the heart of all that amazing, astounding, astonishing ministry and teaching of Jesus. He knew this practice of spiritual surrender, of letting go like nobody else! For him, grace was not merely a gift to be received but to be lived! Can any of us imagine Jesus' arms on a doorjamb? I can't! But he knew what we forget. With gratitude for God's gift of a beloved life, he knew God was saying you're welcome and beloved before he could say thank you! He structured his life of fearless love and radical welcome to every person and experience by not only receiving God's grace and love but by living it every day, and so actively letting go and letting God at every step. Letting go of fear! Letting go of the need for answers, security, control or material goods. Letting go of the striving to succeed or impress. Letting go of our human cycles of blame, shame and scapegoating violence! Letting go of hatred for enemies, or of bloodthirsty vengeance. Letting go and so, finding the freedom and joy to speak the truth and live fully in love with courage come what may. His model of letting go *is* the way that knows the way! Letting go and trusting God's courage and grace, letting go and living in and out of that font of grace, wide and wide, sweeping and sweeping!

St Francis knew it too. I learned a line just this week from my spiritual director of over 20 years Rev. Ken Orth who is with us today. He recalled to me what Francis said: "that a man had not yet given up everything for God as long as he held on to the moneybag of his own opinions"! Imagine that, here in Cambridge, even letting go of our opinions, which in a place like this may be more costly than money. How many of us felt a bracing hand within us reach for the doorjamb on that one?

And yet this is the Way, the Way of Jesus, the Way of letting go, the Way that knows the way, because we don't know and can't know it! We don't and can't know what comes next, but we can trust God enough to get ready, to be set, and when the time comes to go and keep letting go!

I had already committed the Dillard quote to memory when I jumped from that plane. It's from a now tattered and treasured copy of a version my dad inscribed and gave to me the Christmas before he died. Here's another thing I didn't learn until later, a poem that some of you have heard me recite before sitting across from me in the office. I can't resist sharing it once more. It's called *The Avowal* by Denise Levertov. Hear it again or the first time (you may want to close your eyes):

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,
knowing no effort earns
that all-surrounding grace.

One more time.

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,
knowing no effort earns
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May it be so for all of us.

First Church, you have amazed me. You have astonished me. You have astounded me. In your patience, in your caring, in your deep appetite for worship, study and prayer, in your speaking the truth in love to power, in your sharing God's welcome with all kinds of people within and outside of these walls, in the ways you have already practiced letting go of beloved saints, in the ways you have practiced the relinquishment of time, resources and power, in the ways you have modeled a spiritual practice of repair and reparations, in the shaping and forming of genuine community and covenantal ties that extends God's abiding love from century to century, from generation to generation, from strength to strength Throughout it all, I have heard the voice of God in Christ, and fathoms and fathoms of grace in this place, and I will never forget "how sweet the sound". For this, thank you, and thanks be to God, source and font of it all. I will hold you here forever. (Will you join me in this posture for a moment?) With that fearless love of Jesus, you too are ready, First Church! You are set! You are so set! And so we let go. [Open arms.] It's the way that knows the way. Beloved church, keep letting go, always thanking the host, always with arms wide open to new adventure, ideas and people, ever living, ever falling, ever surrounded and enfolded in God's amazing, astonishing, astounding grace! Amen.