

Abundance For The Journey
By Jason Huff
Jeremiah 31:10-14, Psalm 147:1-11, Luke 9:1-17

This morning's final Scripture reading is from Luke 9:1-17. Listen now to God's Word. "When Jesus had called the Twelve together, he gave them power and authority to drive out all demons and to cure diseases, and he sent them out to preach the kingdom of God and to heal the sick. He told them: "Take nothing for the journey-- no staff, no bag, no bread, no money, no extra tunic. Whatever house you enter, stay there until you leave that town. If people do not welcome you, shake the dust off your feet when you leave their town, as a testimony against them." So they set out and went from village to village, preaching the gospel and healing people everywhere. Now Herod the tetrarch heard about all that was going on. And he was perplexed, because some were saying that John had been raised from the dead, others that Elijah had appeared, and still others that one of the prophets of long ago had come back to life. But Herod said, "I beheaded John. Who, then, is this I hear such things about?" And he tried to see him. When the apostles returned, they reported to Jesus what they had done. Then he took them with him and they withdrew by themselves to a town called Bethsaida, but the crowds learned about it and followed him. He welcomed them and spoke to them about the kingdom of God, and healed those who needed healing. Late in the afternoon the Twelve came to him and said, "Send the crowd away so they can go to the surrounding villages and countryside and find food and lodging, because we are in a remote place here." He replied, "You give them something to eat." They answered, "We have only five loaves of bread and two fish-- unless we go and buy food for all this crowd." (About five thousand men were there.) But he said to his disciples, "Have them sit down in groups of about fifty each." The disciples did so, and everybody sat down. Taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, he gave thanks and broke them. Then he gave them to the disciples to set before the people. They all ate and were satisfied, and the disciples picked up twelve basketfuls of broken pieces that were left over."

What does it take to have faith? I think the best definition of faith is that place where belief and trust meet. Belief is what happens when our minds decide that something is true. Most of our beliefs come to us without even thinking about them. I believe that I am standing up in front of a church right now. You believe that your eyelids are already getting heavy. Right? Most things around us we just believe because we've never seen evidence to the contrary. There's no reason to think that our eyes and ears are lying to us.

Now sometimes belief takes more work. I believe the earth is round, even though people for centuries upon centuries didn't. I have never been off the planet to check it out. But I've seen the photos from our astronauts and our satellites; I understand how the solar system works, and I am convinced it's all true. This sort of belief takes more work, but the truth is, these beliefs never get challenged. All of us hold them, even though we can't verify them personally.

But beliefs get challenged when we actually have to put trust in them. I believe in a lot of things that I don't have to trust in, like the earth being round. But trust is something different. Trust says that my belief is testable. Trust is belief in action. Trust says that I hold my belief strongly enough that I am willing to act on it and risk something in holding that belief. Trust combined with belief is faith.

Most of our faith is pretty minor. For example, I like **Star Trek**. I believe that **Star Trek** is worth watching. I trusted that belief enough to plop down money to see the latest film, and I wasn't disappointed. I've been disappointed in the past, because there've been some lousy **Star Trek** stuff, but not so much that I lost my faith in it. Now that kind of faith isn't all that important. The most I lose is a the price of a ticket and a couple of hours. No big loss.

But faith in God is a different story. Faith in God requires a lot more trust than what we are normally used to giving because it's faith in things we can't see and verify, things that don't make sense to our senses. Think about whether you're more comfortable travelling on a plane or driving your car. For most of us, there's no question...we hop into our cars and drive around without even thinking about it. But get into a plane, and all of a sudden we start getting nervous. We don't feel safe. Now every statistic shows that flying is far safer than driving a car any day of the week. But to fly, we have to put our trust in something that goes beyond our belief. A car to most of us is nothing more than wheels and a motor; we understand the concept. But planes? Unless you're a seasoned traveler, it's still hard to believe that a gigantic piece of metal can take you thousands of miles up in the air and safely get you where you're going.

There are times when we are asked to take a step out in faith and trust that we are able to do what we've been told we can do. Sometimes, it happens just like this... [**Arctic Tale** movie clip]...see, isn't that great? The father pushed the young bird along, they both flew farther along than anybody thought possible, then there's a touchdown, and everybody else follows along. All is good. But then, sometimes it goes like this...in this clip from *The Matrix*, the hero Neo is learning how to take a literal leap of faith beyond what his mind tells him he can do. [**Matrix** clip] A lot of the time, that right there is what we are afraid of...that we're going to make a leap of faith only to fall flat on the pavement.

The two back-to-back stories in Luke's gospel today illustrate how Jesus called the disciples to a leap of faith. The disciples actually model this well at first, but as the leaps get bigger, the disciples start to lose their trust in what Jesus has told them. The good news is, Jesus helps them overcome their disbelief, and what He showed them can still help us today in trusting God to make good on His promises.

As the passage starts, Jesus is sending his twelve closest disciples out on what amounts to their first missionary trip. They're getting their first chance to put what they've learned into practice. Now Jesus doesn't make things easy on them. He makes it clear this is going to require some trust on their part. They are going to live off of the kindness of strangers. Now this wasn't incredibly surprising. In their day, teachers known as Cynics would go into a town and they would exchange lessons for pay. But Jesus' commands about taking no money, no food, and not even a second change of clothes set them apart. He also tells them to stay at the first house in town they enter. The Cynics and travelling priests of various religions would wander from home to home until they got the best accommodations that could be had. Jesus didn't want his disciples to show favoritism. Jesus commands them to shake the dust off their feet if they leave a town where they aren't welcomed. This was something that Jewish people of the time did when they left a pagan town or country. Jesus is essentially saying that if his disciples aren't welcomed, the people of that town are ungodly no matter how Jewish or religious they might be. So the disciples are sent out literally with nothing.

Well, that's not entirely true. When Jesus sends the disciples out, the passage says that he gave them power and authority and sent them to heal the sick and proclaim the Kingdom of God. Jesus' commands make it certain that they must act in faith, but they now have Jesus' power at their command. They've seen him do these kinds of miracles, and now his authority has been given to them.

We don't know how long the disciples are out on this mission, but they succeed. Word of the disciples' preaching makes huge waves, because now it's not just one person talking about the Kingdom of God but thirteen. People are getting healed all over the place, miracles are happening, it's truly impressive. In fact, Herod, who's the puppet king of Israel under Roman authority, is shaking in his boots about what people are saying because, as it turns out, he had John the Baptist beheaded. Some people are saying that the disciples are talking about John being raised from the dead. Herod is so concerned that he wants to see Jesus for himself just to find out what is going on.

A couple of months go by. The disciples meet back with Jesus and they are excited. They've taken the leap of faith! And so Jesus takes them on a retreat to Bethsaida to get away and talk about everything that's happened. But they don't even get there before the crowds come and find Jesus. He welcomes them, heals them...it's all good. And then it gets late, and the crowd by this point is enormous. The twelve go to Jesus and say, "Send them away so they can get food, 'cause there's nothing here." And Jesus turns to them and asks them to show their faith. He says, "You give them something to eat."

And this is the really surprising thing. These disciples have been doing miracles, they themselves haven't gone hungry, God has provided for them and they have spent a couple of months doing the impossible. But they look out at the crowd and they freak. They say, "All we have are a couple of fish and five loaves of bread. Do you want us to go buy some food?" The sheer numbers have intimidated them. Their faith has grown, but they just hit a wall.

But Jesus doesn't condemn them. He has the disciples separate the people out into groups of fifty. He gives thanks to God for the food they do have. He gives it to the disciples and says, "Go to it." And they do! The miracle starts with Jesus, but the disciples carry it out. By the time they are done, they've got tons of food left over from a crowd of at least 5,000. Through Christ, the impossible becomes possible.

Now each gospel writer sees things in a different way, and this miracle is no different. Luke's intent is to show us that God is going to be faithful to us both when we are called upon to show our faith in little ways and in great big ways. God is not only faithful, but He provides in abundance. Earlier in Luke, we heard how when people give, God promises in return a "good measure, pressed down, shaken together, and overflowing." The 23rd Psalm tells us that God anoints us and makes our cups overflow. The disciples themselves lacked for nothing on their journey. When this massive crowd got fed, the baskets were overflowing with far more food afterwards. Romans 5:15 tells us that through Jesus Christ, God's grace overflows to us. There can be no doubt that when we have true faith, that perfect blend of belief and trust, abundance will be there for all our journeys.

So how do we make the leap of faith when things are hard? How can we live our lives *today* in God's abundance? This passage tells us how. Here's the first truth: real abundance comes *after* putting our faith in God and testing our trust. The disciples had the opportunity to see God's abundance because they had nothing of their own. If they had taken money or extra tunics or anything with them, they would have never seen the provisions that God had ready for them. The thing that blocks our realization of God's abundance is our own self reliance. There's a famous prayer that comes from **The Simpsons**, where at dinner one night Bart prays, "Dear God, we paid for all this stuff ourselves, so thanks for nothing." Pastor and author Lee Strobel wrote that, in reality, Bart's prayer was not so much sacrilegious as it was honest. We *do* believe that we make our own way and provide for ourselves. The truth is, the disciples had plenty of resources at their disposal. They travelled without extra provisions only because that's what Jesus said to do. That was the step of faith he asked from them. The step of faith wasn't going on the journey; it was trusting that God would provide for that journey when they left everything else behind.

So where is God asking you to take a leap of faith like this? In your finances? In your marriage? In your parenting? In your outreach to other people? God wants you to move out in faith. I can't tell you where in your life that's going to happen, but sooner or later, God will ask you to do something that requires you to trust Him, not just have some mental belief in Him. And what you do with that request is going to make the difference between seeing God's abundance in your life and sitting on the sidelines wondering how to get it. You have to *move*, you have to *trust*, in order to see that abundance.

Here's the second truth: God makes the impossible possible on a personal level. Jesus knew exactly what he was doing when he separated the crowd into groups of fifty. When the twelve looked out on the gigantic crowd, they froze up – nobody could feed this size of a crowd. But when Jesus got the crowd into smaller groups, the disciples lost their fear and regained their faith and carried out this miracle. Suddenly, it was doable. And that's something that we have to consider. Every great miracle, every great show of God's abundance, happens one step at a time. The disciples feed every group, fifty by fifty by fifty.

So what does this mean for us? You know, I've talked about my vision where Church of the Covenant becomes a church where a thousand plus people worship and learn about God and become disciples. Sometimes, I hear back, "Well, I like a small church." The problem is, a small church that wants to remain small is a dead church. There's no way a small church can survive because a church only survives by the Spirit's working, and when the Spirit is working, the result is abundance, including an abundance of people. But then we run into a new problem. Growing to a church of a thousand people seems mind-boggling. But the solution is the same as the one Jesus found: the miracle happens a person or two at a time. It takes one person bringing a friend, and them bringing a friend, and pretty soon you have a full house. Think about it...in the last year, we averaged 60 people in the service each week. Imagine if one week, every single person in the church brought just one friend to church, just one. And imagine the next week, those newcomers each bring one friend to the church. Everyone who comes to the church brings only one friend, and they stay and invite one friend. If you could get that to happen, do you know how long it would take to get a thousand people? 16 weeks. Less than 4 months. That's with everyone in the church bringing just one friend who sticks and brings another friend.

Or maybe you are called to give more to the church. Maybe you want to make the leap to tithing, ten percent of your income, which is what God sets down as our baseline. Maybe you're already there but God is calling you to give above and beyond that to support our Compassion child or a mission trip. The dollar signs are just popping in your head. Well, how do you start giving what God has called you to give? It might not work as some massive lump sum. But maybe you'll find that money as you set aside the cash you would have used for a nice meal out each week or an extra round of golf or a trip to the beauty parlor. Not huge, but put it aside each week for a month and you have a lot more than you would have ever thought possible. When God calls on us to make a big leap of faith, He asks us to make little leaps day by day that add up to something extraordinary.

Here's the third truth: each leap of faith you take will strengthen your spiritual muscles and show you more of God's abundance. The more faith you place in God, the more your faith will be proven trustworthy. Many of you know that my dad was a caterer. When people asked him what it was like coordinating huge parties, he said, "You know, it's not *really* fun until it's over 500 people." Most of us can barely imagine putting together food for 20 people, let alone hundreds. But my dad did it so often that small parties – that is, a gathering of 150 people or so – were a piece of cake. The same is true with faith.

Many of the great people of the faith start out not wanting to take the leaps of faith God gives them. Sometimes they did great miracles only to falter when their lives were threatened or situations got too difficult. But when they continued on with God, their faith grew through their time spent trusting Him. If you keep trusting and keep believing and keep doing what God asks of us in His Word, pretty soon you'll be in the place where you'll have built up the spiritual muscles so those leaps of faith come naturally. God may ask more of you each time, the leaps may never be easy, but you will go farther than you ever thought possible with Him. So you might as well get those first baby leaps started.

The thought I want to leave you with today is this: sometimes we are scared to take leaps of faith. We're afraid of where they might leave us, if when we're done we will be able to be safe and secure once again. I can tell you this: putting your faith and hope and trust in God and in His son Jesus Christ will never leave you comfortable. It may not be easy or safe by the world's standards. But with each leap you take, you come closer and closer to embracing the heart of God and knowing all the abundance He provides for those He loves. Let's pray.