

June 11, 2023 Message

Catherine Brewer

Sermon “Against the Odds: Faith in God’s Promises”

Once again, good morning and welcome! For those of you who may not know me yet, my name is Catherine Brewer; I usually go by “Catie” for short. I accompany Brent Brewer, who is one of the elders on the Buildings and Grounds Committee here at FPC. I am also mom to almost-11-year-old Alonzo and almost-9-year-old Lillian. On many Sundays, I lead a video discussion Sunday School class. On weekdays, I teach and do research in the Department of Chemical & Materials Engineering at NMSU.

Today, I’m going to deviate from my usual talking points about heat transfer and chemical process design. Instead, I’m going to talk about one of the things that I find most awe-inspiring and most difficult about God: having faith His promises. When I first read the lectionary texts for today, I was confident that, with enough study, inspiration would strike and I would have tips on how to have the kind of faith that we just read about. Weeks later, I panicked a bit as I came to the conclusion that I am not the right person for *that* sermon.

Let me give you an example of what I mean. As a high school student, I had the opportunity to visit the Museum of Science and Industry in Chicago—which was awesome. On my way out of the museum, I made a quick trip through the gift shop, intending to admire all those things that make nerds happy but not to buy anything. Within the posters, I found something that I had to take home: a 2 ft x 3 ft compilation of the derivatives of Murphy’s Law. It was like finding that poem that said exactly what you wanted to say to express a feeling. Just under the poster’s title, it read: “Murphy was an optimist”. Among the entries were the following:

- Leakproof seals—will. Interchangeable parts—will not.
- Friends come and go, but enemies accumulate.
- A bird in hand is safer than one overhead.
- When a broken appliance is demonstrated for the repair man, it will work perfectly.
- Anything good in life is either illegal, immoral, or fattening.
- All warranties expire upon payment of invoice.
- There is always one more bug.

And one that I have often quoted to my students in the laboratory:

- There is never time to do it right, but always time to do it over.

My confidence in the validity of Murphy's Law, "that anything that can go wrong, will go wrong," is a useful mindset for an engineer (or a parent of small children). Such a philosophy promotes creative brainstorming, and that brainstorming leads to preparation. For example, the text to this sermon exists in two file formats on my computer, in my email, and in hardcopy, with the pages numbered just in case the papers are dropped or shuffled.

Those who have traveled with me have seen this preparation philosophy in action. Not only will I make hotel and transportation reservations weeks in advance, I will carry hardcopies of those reservations with addresses and phone numbers in case my technology does not work. I will probably pre-peruse the menus of candidate restaurants and I will definitely identify locations for restroom breaks. Unstructured time is carefully allocated within appropriate blocks in the schedule, and my back-up plans have back-up plans. And still the anxiety persists that I have failed to adequately prepare, that I have forgotten to consider something...

Onto this backdrop, imagine my incredulity and admiration for Abram. In our reading, God asks Abram to leave three things:

his country, his kindred, and his father's house. For "leaving his country", Abram had done that before. Abram had been born in the city of Ur, between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, and had lived there with his father, Terah, his two brothers, and their families. At God's command, the whole household had moved from Ur to Haran, in modern-day Syria. The family became well established, so well in fact that, several decades later, Abram's servant will return to Haran to find a wife for Isaac among the household's descendants. In Abram's second calling, God is asking Abram to leave most of his family behind—permanently. Abram will need to leave his father's house, meaning that he will no longer have the security of his clan and the family's property. Abram, Sarai, and Lot, and the people they are responsible for, are going to become nomads, in an arid region full of strangers and unbelievers, without an itinerary beyond "a land that I will show you." I cannot tell you how Abram managed this kind of faith. I have even less idea of how Abram could manage faith about the other part of God's promise: that Abram would be made a great nation when, at 75, he and his wife have still not had any children.

In our reading from the Gospel, Matthew tells us of two other inspiring examples of faith: the healing of the woman by a touch of Jesus' cloak and the raising of the leader's daughter. Most people are likely to remember the version of the story from the Gospel of Luke, where we learn that the leader's name is Jairus, that Jairus first came to Jesus when his daughter was gravely ill, and that it was on the way to Jairus' house with a large crowd that Jairus' daughter died. Luke adds some other details: when Jesus' cloak was touched in the crowd, Jesus asks about who touched him and only then did the woman come forward. This was a woman who had tried everything over the course of 12 years. If there was anyone who should have been a skeptic, she had a good case. I can

only imagine what she must have heard and seen from Jesus before this day to give her the inspiration to touch the hem of Jesus' cloak. How different from all the other doctors, healers, and religious people would Jesus have had to be for her to be convinced? Now, she likely approached Jesus stealthily out of consideration for Jesus' time and reputation. She did not want to delay him on his way to help the dying child. She did not want to call attention to herself or put Jesus in a situation to become ceremonially unclean. Somehow, she knew that just the smallest of interactions would be enough. What I believe is the most important about this woman's story for us is not the miracle itself, but rather, Jesus' response. He does not keep moving and pretend it never happened. He takes the time to address the woman as someone important to him and to reassure her that her healing was intentional. She would never have to wonder what caused her healing or if she was valued.

There are many times when I wish I could know that directly: that I could know that God notices, that God has the power to change the situation, and that I can trust him even when I cannot see the itinerary or the back-up plans. What a reassurance it must have been to be a disciple and to watch Jesus in action.

I have to remind myself that sometimes God works in unexpected ways to see that His will is done. I have drawn comfort from a very unusual source: the portrayal of God's methods within the fiction series, *The Harry Dresden Files*, by Jim Butcher. Harry Dresden is a powerful wizard who lives in Chicago and who interacts with many supernatural creatures. One of Harry's friends and sometimes comrade-in-arms against evil, is Michael Carpenter, an actual carpenter and a Knight of the Sword. (Bear with me on the fantasy genre details here: there are three mythical swords, where each has a name and contains a piece of THE cross. As the swords are

passed down through time, God identifies worthy sword-wielders who carry out His work, sometimes for only one situation and sometimes for many years.) In the book, *Grave Peril*, Harry and Michael have been working together to track down an evil spirit that has been causing all kinds of havoc in Chicago. Michael and his wife, Charity, are expecting another child to add to their large family. One evening, Harry comes over to the Carpenter house to discuss plans with Michael. Michael is watching the children while Charity goes out to sooth a late-night pregnancy pizza craving. Later that night, Michael and Harry learn that Charity has been kidnapped by the evil spirit. They both need to go to the rescue...but someone has to stay with the children. At that very moment, the priest of the local church, Father Forthill, arrives at the Carpenter house. The priest explains that his car had mysteriously broken down a couple of blocks away. Seeing that Michael and Harry are anxious to leave, Father Forthill recognizes the divine intervention and offers to babysit. Michael and Harry are now free to save the day. Over and over again in the books, Michael demonstrates an unwavering faith that God will intervene and things will work out for the good, and God does. Michael and the other Knights continually remind Harry that God is in the coincidences.

I found the story in *Grave Peril* particularly comforting because it triggered a memory of a time in my own life where, looking back, I am certain that God intervened. I was an exchange student in Poland during my second year of undergraduate studies. Over the New Year's holiday, my roommate and I traveled to Prague so that we could add another country to our passport stamps. We had printed and studied maps of our route from the train station to our hostel (this was before we had phones with GPS—the horror!). The hostel was advertised as easy to find, right off of a major road with a large sign. As Mr. Murphy would predict, we could not find it. After walking

back and forth along the road for almost an hour in the December cold, I was getting panicky. The street was deserted and it was getting dark. My friend and I were discussing the options for returning to the train station and seeing if some hotel had something available. Just then, to our great surprise, we hear a voice asking us in American English if we are looking for the hostel. We turn to find another college-aged student walking behind us. She explained that she was on her way back to the hostel because she had forgotten something. She was the only other guest currently staying at the hostel, so the host had not bothered to light up the sign or stay by the desk. She led us to the building, unlocked the outer door, and let us hang out with her until the host returned after dinner and we got our own rooms and keys. The rest of our trip went smoothly from there. I do not remember this student's name or where in the States she was from, but I am confident that her being at that spot on that road at that time was not an accident.

I am sure most of you can think of similar stories, times when we have needed and received help in spite of our best planning and preparation. This is the part of God's promises that I find so awe-inspiring. I cannot see how all the pieces will fit together but God does.

But what about those times when, from our perspective, things do not work out so smoothly? What if God's answer includes the experience of 12 years of disappointment first? What if our part in God's plan is the uncertain life of a nomad? Why is it so hard to have the kind of faith that we want to have? This is the part of God's promises that I find so difficult.

I do not have the quick and inspiring words of wisdom that I wish I did. However, there are two things that you and I can have confidence in. First is that God loves us—loves us

enough to carry out a plan all the way from Abram's time to send Jesus in person so that we can see, and touch, and know. Like with the healing of the woman, Jesus did not just take care of the sin that was separating us from a relationship with God; through the words recorded in the Gospels, we too can hear his words, "take heart, daughter, your faith has made you well." We know that Jesus notices us and we know that his actions were intentional. Secondly, no matter how wrong everything is going, we can have confidence that we are not alone. God goes with us and knows the long-term itinerary.

Let us pray. Heaven Father, help us with our faith. Give us the humility to admit that can see only a tiny fraction of your plans for us. Give us the reassurance that your Son and our Savior Jesus has already taken care of our most critical need. And give us the courage to go where you would have us travel. In Jesus' name, Amen.