

The Adventure of Living

Have you ever wanted to change the world but didn't know where to begin? John Wood was like that. He was a top executive at Microsoft in the 1990s with responsibility for the Asian market. By all accounts he was a rising star in the company with a great future ahead of him. And yet, Wood felt trapped between the all-consuming demands of his career and a desire to do something lasting and significant.

Stressed from the demands of his job, he took a vacation in Nepal. While trekking across the Himalayas, he visited a remote Nepalese school and learned that the students had few books in the library. He offered to run a book drive to provide the school with books, but he was met with polite skepticism. After all, no matter how well intentioned, why would a successful software executive take valuable time out of his life and gather books for an impoverished school?

But John Wood did return to that school with thousands of books bundled on the back of a yak. And at that moment, he made a momentous decision. He would walk away from Microsoft and created Read to Read – an organization that has donated more than 1.2 million books, established more than 2,600 libraries and 200 schools, and sent 1,700 girls to school on scholarship – ultimately touching the lives of 875,000 children with the lifelong gift of education. (1)

John Wood saw the need, made the decision, stepped out in faith, ventured into new horizons, and did what others told him was impossible. I don't know if John Wood is a Christian or not, but there is no doubt that he is a person of faith.

In our lesson from Hebrews 11, we have one of the most quoted statements about faith. We read these words: “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” That's a little abstract. So we turn to the writer of Hebrews and ask, “Could you be more specific? Could you give us an example?” And he does. He gives us the example of Abraham.

Abraham left his home, his extended family, his wealth, and his security to follow God's leading. He didn't know where he would end up. He didn't know what sacrifices he might have to make. But when God called, Abraham answered. This, says the writer of Hebrews, is what faith is. It is a complete and utter trust in the goodness of God. It is a complete and utter willingness to step out of our comfort zone when God calls. It is a complete and utter readiness to move beyond the safe and secure and journey toward an unknown horizon. That's what faith is.

But how do we develop a faith like that? It's not easy, is it?

Over the years I have been a guest speaker at a number of stewardship conferences in Canada and the United States. After one of my talks in which I kept repeating the phrase “God is good – all the time,” a man came up to me and said, “Why should I not be cynical?” I asked what he meant, and he replied, “There is just too much suffering in the

world for me to believe that God is good. Too much tragedy, too much evil, and too many innocent people dying needlessly... how can I believe God is good in a world like this?"

My heart went out to this man. Who has not had such doubts, particularly when tragedy hits close to home? People outside the church assume you and I must be naïve. They assume we've never encountered tragedies beyond the scope of imagination. Some of you have lost children. Some of you have watched loved ones suffer terrible deaths. Some of you have had to step out into the unknown, not sure where you were going or what you would find. Life is rarely safety-proof. But time after time you have risen from the ashes of grief with your faith in God restored. It's not easy. Life is hard. But still we trust that "faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." We still believe in the goodness of God, even when present reality is all out of kilter.

Several years ago I read Willa Cather's novels, *My Antonia* and *O Pioneers!* These are stories about immigrants, people from a variety of European backgrounds, men and women who left their homelands, left their friends and family, crossed the ocean, looking for a future. As Heather, Allison and I were travelling across the continent to come to London, I thought about all those pioneers who went west to the prairies and over the Rockies right to the Pacific Ocean. When I think of what they had to face: terrible summer heat; winds that blow constantly; winters that are fiercely cold – when I think of that, I marvel at their determination. To plant crops, to survive, they had to plough fields covered with prairie grass as tall as an adult, and do it with crude equipment. Those pioneers couldn't possibly have predicted the difficulty of their journey. They couldn't possibly have predicted the terrible mortality. There was no way they could have known how long it would take to tame their environment. But they persevered, faced hardships and moved forward. They had the faith willing to take risks and moved beyond safety and security because a better land, a better way of life lay before them.

Abraham and his family traveled through hostile lands. They were vulnerable, afraid, surrounded by people who had no respect for Abraham's God. Still, they did not turn back. They took hold of the promise of God, seeing the vision and being focused on a goal. That's why the author of Hebrews can say, "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen."

What might this kind of faith mean for you today? Are you willing to take risks for God, to move beyond your comfort zone, and dare to do the impossible because God is calling you to do it? You may not have the resources or the talent of a John Wood who has now helped over one million children, but every person has been gifted by God to do something with the abilities we possess. Quite simply, we are here on this earth to give and to serve and to care about others. And honestly, that's the only way to experience the adventure of living – to get out of yourself and live for a cause greater than you.

Some of you have been asked to teach a Sunday school class – and for you it was like going over Niagara Falls in a barrel. And you stood that first day in front of the class filled with uncertainties. But once it was over, there was the feeling of having

accomplished something significant and worthwhile. Some of you have been asked to be greeters or ushers or serve on the altar guild or help with coffee hour, and you felt surely this is not what you were called to do. But you discovered the joy of working with God and your fellow parishioners to offer hospitality and enhance our worship. Some of you have been asked to stand up for God when something unethical has come up in the workplace. Some of you have been a voice in the greater community for social justice, equal rights and a host of causes that make a difference in the lives of people. It hasn't always been easy. Perhaps you have had to face some tough times. But today, you're glad you did. It's not easy to trust the goodness of God. It's not easy to step out in faith, move beyond your security, risk and try some new things.

And it's not easy to put God at the center of our lives. It is the wise person who knows that our ultimate security is in God and God alone. Everything else in life is bound to disappoint but God is good all the time. God can be trusted even when life gets tough.

One of my favorite Christians is the Scottish athlete Eric Liddell whose story is told in the Oscar-winning film *Chariots of Fire*. Eric Liddell was a devout Christian with a strong faith in God. He also happened to be one of the greatest runners that Great Britain had ever produced. He was almost certain to win the 100 meter race in the 1924 Olympic Games, but upon learning that the race was to be run on a Sunday, he refused to run. He was castigated in the English newspapers for being unpatriotic. A plea by the Prince of Wales for him to compromise his beliefs and run on Sunday was rejected. How could he withstand such pressure and refuse to run on Sunday? One observer pointed out it was Eric's faith that gave him the ability to run so fast. Take away that faith and he would be just another runner in the middle of the pack. Eric, you see, ran for the glory of God and Jesus Christ.

As it turned out, Eric was able to run in the 400 meter race during the week and won it decisively. He went on to serve as a missionary in China where he stayed until he died in a Japanese prisoner of war camp in World War II. At the end of *Chariots of Fire*, the film mentions that upon learning of his death, "All Scotland mourned."

All of us will have tough times in life, but there is a tough faith that can meet the challenge. What is that faith? It is a complete and utter trust in the goodness of God. It is a complete and utter readiness to step out beyond our comfort zone into the unknown, trusting that God will uphold us every step of the way. It is a complete and utter willingness to put God at the center of our lives, surrendering to his will, doing his work, and furthering his glory. Focus on this kind of faith and you will experience the adventure of living.

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Text – Hebrew 11:1-3, 8-19

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1. John Wood, *Leaving Microsoft to Change the World* (Harper Collins, 2007)

