

This I Believe:
This I Believe About the Bible– I Believe in My '29 Ford
The United Church of Gainesville
September 27, 2010
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Mark 6:47-51 – Jesus walks on water.

I believe that in times in my life when there is no way, God opens a way for me.

When I was thirty three, my father died after a five year struggle with prostate cancer that had metastasized to his bones. He was only sixty two. It was July. The day after the funeral in Pennsylvania I went to the garage at the farm to start up my 1929 Model A Ford, a ritual part of every visit to the farm since I had parked that car there at the end of my senior year in college. That year, for the first time ever, I realized my dad had been too sick to drain the radiator, which meant the water in the engine froze and cracked the cylinder head. I had held it together through my dad's final stages of cancer and even his dying. But after everything else I had lost that year, the broken cylinder head broke me. I started to cry and told Sandy, "I don't think I can take another thing going wrong." Sandy just put her arm around me and said, "We'll work this out somehow."

Her words to me were like those of Jesus to his disciples on the little boat in the middle of the storm at sea, "Take heart. Do not be afraid."

A way opened where there had been no way, and here is how it happened. My dad had another old car in the barn, a 1941 Cadillac Fleetwood. Years before, a friend of my dad had tried to sell my dad the Cadillac to for \$50. So get this, my dad wouldn't pay him \$50 for this car, so his friend just gave it to him.

It was a gangster car with a giant hood that shot half way across the intersection ten seconds before you even got there. After two years the transmission went out on this Cadillac, so it just sat in the barn and every now and then I'd start it up just to keep the engine limber and I guess to pretend I was Al Capone.

One spring when my dad was opening the barn for the summer, he discovered that he had locked a raccoon in the car the previous fall. The raccoon had eaten the plastic insulation off all the wiring in the car, then chewed through the back seat and died in the trunk.

We didn't touch the Cadillac after that.

This summer of my dad's death, a local car collector who knew my dad attended the funeral. He came by the farm just after I discovered the cracked cylinder head in the Model A. He said he'd get the Model A running - new cylinder head, some wiring, and general spruce up in trade for the Cadillac. We had a deal.

The storm calmed in that moment.

I believe in my 1929 Model A Ford.

My Uncle Alvin, a public school music teacher bought the Model A in 1948 to pull a trailer to haul wheat in Kansas for the land he farmed in the summer. My cousins and I played in it by day and by night rode in the rumble seat under the moonlight down back Kansas dirt roads.

When I was fourteen, my Uncle Alvin wanted to buy some land my dad still owned in Kansas. I convinced my dad to let him use the Model A as partial payment. We towed it back to Pennsylvania on a tow bar behind our '54 Buick, with me riding in it all the way. I worked off the \$400 I owed my dad for the car during the next two summers. I spent my spare time between ages 14-16 stripping the Model A down to bare metal, pounding out all the dents, painting it and learning how to keep it running. I drove it my senior year in high school. I brought it to Gettysburg College my junior and senior years.

After going out for a pizza on my first date with Sandy, on a cold winter Pennsylvania Friday night in January, I went to start it and the choke came off in my hand. First, realize this car won't start in the cold without the choke. Second, back then women had hours in the dorms and if you didn't make it back by midnight on a Friday, they would remove your permission to stay out after 9:00 for the next two weekends. I hopped out of the car, found all the pieces to the choke on the ground, snapped them together and the car started. Sandy thought I was a genius and that I could fix anything. In reality, all I could fix was that '29 Ford.

Romance was not easy in that car. It had no windows. In the winter we snapped on side curtains. The only heat was what blew in from the engine through a hole in the floorboard from the engine. You can see how small the front seat is when you walk by it outside. And if you went out to do what was called "parking", everybody knew where you were and what you were doing.

When our son Matt was in high school, he wanted to drive the Model A to PK Yonge. So we towed it down here from Pennsylvania, and he fixed it up again. Chris took it over after Matt graduated, had it painted black, and it lived through his high school career.

After Chris graduated, I got it back in one piece. To shift it you have to do something called a double clutch because the manual transmission has no synchromesh. The Model A has mechanical brakes, which means that four metal rods go from the brake pedal to each wheel. You have to stand on the brakes just to get the car to slow down.

The car has two Aogah horns and a kind of trunk known as a turtle back that folds out to make a rumble seat.

When I get into the Model A, I still see my uncle leaning over the steering wheel (which of course had no power steering so you have to lean on it) his straw hat poking the canvas top. I see my dad driving my friends and me around in it before I had a license.

I see my mom, who on cold winter nights in high school would say, “You make sure that car starts, because I’m not pushing you down the driveway in the morning.” And sure enough, come morning, there my mother would be in her quilted robe pushing me down the driveway to jump start it so I could get to school.

I see Sandy sitting by my side on our first dates in college, with that heart-melting red hair and endearing smile and a blanket wrapped all around her legs to keep her from freezing.

I see Matt and Chris in the rumble seat when they were little, and then driving off to high school in it when they were big. I hear the phone ringing at midnight with Matt saying the battery was dead, and the cheerleaders were pushing him up and down the alley behind Leonardo’s and it wouldn’t start. And I would go down with the tow rope I kept as regular equipment and drag it home.

And now my grandchildren call it “Papa’s Old Car” and squeal as they ride in the rumble seat or sit up front and honk the Ahoogah horn.

That car is now eighty years old. I’ve had it fifty one years. While I love my Prius with hybrid technology and electric windows, air conditioning, ABS brakes, and air bags, I believe in my ’29 Model A Ford.

That car has lost a wheel while I was driving. Both headlights once shorted out on date on a back country Pennsylvania road in the dead of night when I was in high school. I never saw that girl again. It leaks so much oil I call it a self-changing oil system. It has caught fire, refused to run until I took it apart and put it back together again, hauled a homecoming float when I was in college and carried Lawton Chiles in a Gator homecoming parade. I believe in it because it’s like the bible, sometimes outdated, sometimes quirky, but always full of essential truths worth learning and remembering.

I believe in it, because it is a miracle car. Its miracles for me parallel the miracles of Jesus.

Karl Marx called religion the opiate of the masses, a way out of life’s tough places. Freud echoed Marx. My faith is just the opposite. My Jesus leads me not out of but through life’s rough places. My faith is not one of avoidance of struggle, but of engagement with it. When life has been tough, God has always led me through not out, showing me a way when there was no way.

That car reminds me of the bible, of the Exodus, the children of Israel finding a way to freedom when there was no way.

That car reminds of the bible, of Jesus walking through the mob that wanted to throw him off the cliff the first day he spoke at the synagogue in his home town.

That car reminds me of the bible, of Jesus showing his disciples a way at 4:00 a.m. when they were rowing against the wind thinking they would drown, saying, “Take heart, don’t be afraid, you’ll make it.”

That’s where I started this sermon, when the Model A’s breakdown was a sign and symbol of a storm I could not endure. The holy words

came through Sandy's voice carving out a way for me when there seemed to be no way.

So when I look at dead ends and broken dreams, I believe in my '29 Ford, as a sign and symbol as miraculous as feeding five thousand people when there was no food, as courageous as finding a way through an angry crowd, and as comforting as a friendly face and calming voice in a storm at 4:00 a.m.

That car reminds me of the bible, and I believe in the bible the way I believe in my 1929 Model A Ford.

Prayer –

Before we enter into prayer, I want to say one thing about believing. The instructions for the National Public Radio essays "This I Believe" tell us not to start with what we don't believe, but to go right to, "This I believe." That's hard, especially for us. I had a hard time with that in writing this sermon. Many of the "This I Believe" statements you have sent in to UCG still begin with what you don't believe.

So I am going to invite you into a time of prayer right now to pray for a few images of what you do believe.

Take the things out of your lap. Sit straight. Put your feet on the floor, and place your hands in whatever place suggests openness to you, thumb and forefingers touching, palms down, or hands open palms up.

Close your eyes, or look out the window, or focus on an image in this room that is sacred to you.

As you breathe in, believe the breath you receive is God's Holy Spirit. Breathe out distractions and negative energy.

Now pray for a sentence to come to you, "This I believe about the bible, about goodness, about God..." Take a minute of silence; be open to words, images, gifts... I'll call us to close with our bell.