



LESSONS for LIFE

January 18, 2009 11:00am and 7:00pm

Martin Luther King Day

TAKING FLIGHT, PART III: THE SKI JUMPER

Rev. Dr. Brent Hawkes, C.M.

SACRED READINGS

Lesson: EXODUS 6: 10 - 13

Gospel: MATTHEW 14: 24 – 33

Jesus said in the Gospel of John, *I have come that you might have life and that you might have it more abundantly*. He was saying to us that his purpose was that we might experience life more abundantly. The theme for the sermon series in this month of January is "Taking Flight;" how can we really take off as individuals experiencing that abundant life, and how can we really take off as a church, experiencing what God wants us to be as a church. So in week one we took a look at the butterfly to learn. We saw there that in order for us to take flight transformation has to occur. We have to do the tough inner work of looking inside and being transformed. We learned that just as the caterpillar going into the cocoon has everything it needs – all of the DNA already there – to be transformed into a butterfly so we too don't need to beg God and we don't need to blame others; we have the power and the presence of the holy within us to be able to make the transformation.

In week two of Taking Flight we looked at the airplane and addressed the issue of tackling what might seem to be impossible or what may have seemed to be impossible for us up to this stage in our journey. And today I want to take a look at the ski jumper. Now when I say the ski jumper I don't mean Eddie the Eagle. I don't mean that guy who came from England in 1988 to the Calgary Olympics and the first time he jumped on snow was the time he came to the Olympics and he came last in both of the events that he entered; and when I talk about the ski jumper I don't mean this clip that you're just going to see for a moment – and you have to watch fast as it's a real short one. I'm going to show it to you twice for the person who began their very first jump and landed where they did. Here's the replay in slow motion (pictures are shown on the screen) and landed flat! We go from there to the year 2005, the record of the longest jump in history for a ski jumper: Bjorn-Einar Romoren of Norway jumped 239 meters! The first record for ski jumping was set in 1879 when someone jumped 20 meters. From 20 meters to 239 meters, from that first jump falling on their backside to being able to set a world record. How do you get from (a) the first jump to (b) the second jump? Well, it's more than wishing it to happen. A dream without a plan is wishful thinking. It helps to wish but it's more. It's more than wanting it to happen. It's more than wanting to be an expert in the field. It takes a plan and you have to pay a price; and it's more than just visualization. I believe in visualization and it helps.

Malcolm Gladwell, who became famous for a book called "The Tipping Point" recently has published a book called "Outliers: The Story of Success" and in that book he took a look at a number of successful people to see what some of the patterns were, the key to success; and he said there were a number of things but there were three main ones: Obviously – ability. Someone's not going to become the Olympic champion in ski jumping without some basic ability. Secondly, he said what's important is a support base; that you not think of trying to accomplish the great on your own, whether it's families that support you, or friends who support you in that endeavour. But even those two things alone, those are



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not enough. If you want to be expert in your field, he says, it requires a work ethic and that this is the key to it. Indeed, practise does make perfect. And he took a look at a number of people who are at the top of their respective fields internationally and he noticed that on average they spent ten thousand hours to get where they are: three hours a day, 365 days a year for ten years! Certainly ability; certainly a support base and a work ethic.

Last night John and I were privileged to attend a concert by the Toronto Symphony as we'd had tickets donated to us by some people at the church, and we were sitting there and we were close enough to see the lead pianist and we could see his hands and I'm amazed at what you folks can do, Diane – how fast your hands move over a keyboard, and you know, I could sit at that keyboard and Diane could encourage me, berate me and pray for me and it wouldn't get me to that point without thousands and thousand of hours of work! Thank you for those of you who are willing to put in those hours of work so that we can be the beneficiaries of your skills. Whether it's athletics and you're a ski jumper and I have also to tell you that I will never make a world-champion ski jumper. If you put me at the top of those runs and make me go down it would not be a pretty sight! You would see resistance: don't push me. You would hear me screaming – giving a new meaning to the definition 'screaming queen'! And I would be very likely to hurt myself when I land. It is neither my ability, nor do I have the support base, nor would I put in any work to accomplish that, but many athletes do. Many entrepreneurs – if you read the story of Bill Gates and the work he had to put into it – if you read the story of the Beatles. Many of you know the story of their success in 1964 but what you may not know is that in the early sixties there was a year and a half period when they traveled to Hamburg, Germany, where they put on 270 nights of concerts in a year and a half period to be able to get where they got: Scientists who study and go through trials and failures and persist; leaders in human rights. Martin Luther King Jr. did not just appear before the microphone that day for the *I Have a Dream* speech. There were thousands and thousands of hours that went into his work and preparation and he did not quit when the obstacles came. Certainly the talent was there; when you hear his amazing sermons you'll know that. Certainly courage was there as he kept at it. Also the hard work and the work ethic was there in terms of his seminary training, in terms of his years of community organizing getting to that day and to that point and leading us to this week.

And for Peter. Peter was challenged that day to get out of the boat and to walk on water. I'm going to talk more about this gospel story during my Lent sermon series, but today I just want to highlight a couple of points: First – Peter had to take that first step to step out of the boat and to walk on water. I thought about that this week when we all saw the plane landing on the river in New York and how it must have felt for those first passengers who, when the plane was sitting on water, do what they were told to do: take off the door! I would have wanted to argue, aren't you worried that the water will come in? But they did what they were asked to do and the doors came off and they stepped onto those wings in the midst of the water and led the rest of the people out of the plane and to safety. Someone had to take that first step. And whenever you take a courageous first step there are two sets of emotions that come at you. One step is that sense of excitement and exhilaration and at the same time terror and fear. Both of those emotions come at you. The issue is: Will we let fear sink us or will be let faith lead us? I hope through this series that you as an individual will receive some encouragement and some tools for letting faith lead you and not fear sink you. First: discerning God's call in your life. What is God's will for you in individual situations or in the big decisions? Putting in the hard work and the time and not letting the obstacles sidetrack you, and taking those leaps of faith, those risks that are required along the way. We've had to do that a number of times as a church. In one of our moves we decided to advertise for the very first time to let the world know where we were and who we were and that was very



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risky in the late seventies when many of our folks had jobs and were worried about being found out. Every one of the two church buildings we've bought took a lot of faith because we had no money in the bank in both of those cases, but we made a decision and it was the right thing to do. Adding staff and adding programs when we weren't quite sure we had the base for it, but knowing we had to do it. Taking on social justice issues. Becoming a progressive church; that was a risky thing for us to do. If we became more progressive in our theology would the folks who were Jesus only or Jesus Christians – would they stay with us and still feel welcome? And if the people who were identified as God Christians, would they stay with us? And would we *really* open our doors and would we really become a house of prayer for all people welcoming fully into this church those who don't identify as Christian at all, bringing other faith traditions and other ways of seeing and experiencing God in this place. They all took leaps of faith along the way.

The vision for this church is to be a bridge. My own personal mission statement is leading our people to faith and freedom here and around the world. If we're going to build bridges, if we're going to lead people to faith and freedom then it's going to take hard work and sacrifice and paying the price. We've been talking about two of those areas this month: one – building a strong volunteer base. There's so much more good we could do together and the key is for you to step out of the boat of the comfortable pew and to risk, to offer yourself; to find that place where you could be of service and then getting the training and then to become a leader, possibly. Strong financial base. This is the first step if you want to take it.

The second thing we've been talking about is the strong financial base and this is a challenge for us, a huge challenge for us as a church, for so many of us do not come to this church with adult church experience and so we have a huge education job to do to share the challenge and opportunities. We have so much potential as a church. We've already accomplished great things in social justice. We've already accomplished great things in terms of quality worship and music and spirituality. Folks consistently say what an amazing place this is to come here and worship or be able to watch through the web cast from Singapore or the Philippines or around the world. What an amazing place spiritually here. We've already accomplished so many great things in terms of acts of compassion: our service to people with HIV and AIDS; our support to people coming out to families and friends; our support of the Triangle program in this place. We've accomplished great things in terms of having a web site and there have been hundred and hundreds of people over the years who've come to check out our church and to receive hope and now, with web-casting. We've accomplished a great deal in terms of educational programming, a sampling of which you see this morning but in terms of the year's offering is impressive. Imagine what we could do as we build on this base. Imagine what we can do together when the web-casting becomes used more and more throughout the world when they hear about it, when we have multiple-site worship; people meeting in homes, caring for each other, praying together, serving communion together and using the web-case as a basis for that. When we have on-line courses so people can go on line and learn and grow, when we have a social justice on-line ministry, challenging and supporting people doing justice work around the world. Imagine, as we develop more support groups, for people struggling and dealing with the issue from depression to people looking for work to people wanting to develop healthy living. Yes, it's clear, and I hope I can make it as clear as I can, we need you if we're going to do more and care for more people. And yes, it's also true that the world needs you, needs you committed. It's also true though, that you, I believe, need this for I believe that you in community, offering who you are. The scriptures say it is more blessed to give than to receive and it is in giving that we're blessed and so I believe also that you benefit.



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Now I want to make it really clear this morning because I often wimp out and hesitate and pull back in this part of the sermon and so I just want to say it this way: Folks, I don't care when you fill out the pledge form whether you put MCC Toronto or Green Peace or making poverty history. I don't care. What I want you to do is to make that commitment somewhere. If it happens to be here – great, wonderful! I know our Board of Directors just had heart attacks!! (laughter), but hang in with me. It's the commitment, it's placing that commitment somewhere and if it's here, wonderful, but it needs to be somewhere.

Imagine what we can do together as we bring the skills and talent in this room together; finding your calling, putting in the time and doing the hard work. Taking a leap of faith and taking flight together. Now I want to raise something – two things actually. You know that gospel story – Peter getting out of the boat and walking on water. You've heard it, you've heard it, you've heard it, but there's part of that story, the ending, that kind of shocked me in the last few days as I was preparing this sermon because I think there's a deep, deep tragedy that happened at the end. Think of it – Peter getting out of the boat and was walking on water. Yes, the wind came, yes he got afraid and he started to sink and Jesus reached out and lifted him up. Two mistakes happened: Instead of Peter saying, "Hey folks, come on and get out of the boat. Come with me, experience this, overcome your fears. Come on." What did he do? He went back into the safety of the boat again and he settled for worshipping Jesus. Jesus wanted him to get out of the boat. He wanted to sit comfortably in the boat and worship Jesus. And so, too many of us have wanted to sit comfortably in the church and worship and wonderful as it is it's not good enough, because Jesus says, "Get out of the boat and walk on water."

Well, I have a secret for you this morning and I know I'm opening myself up for criticism by sharing this. I believe that I have been walking on water for years. Now, please don't think I'm trying to equate myself with Jesus. If you know me well enough you know that I'm way too flawed to come close, but what it is is I have heard the call and in 1976 Jesus said, "Get out of the boat, Brent, and take that step. Leave your job, leave your province, move to Toronto and MCC." During that time I have sunk many times and Jesus has consistently lifted me up to keep on going. Well, this morning I'm going to tell you this: I'm not going to get back in the boat. I'm going to keep walking on water. I'm not going to get back in the boat again. I want to invite you to get out of the boat and to walk on water with me. I want you to believe in the kind of miracles that we can perform together. I want you to get out of the boat. Now God called Moses and said, *Go to Pharaoh and let my people go.* And Moses said, "Oh God, I cannot do that. My people aren't listening to me; Pharaoh won't listen to me and I'm a poor speaker." And God said to Moses, *Don't you think I know that? You're not telling me anything I knew and I still call you to go to Pharaoh.* So you may be saying this morning, "I can't make a financial commitment anywhere; too many bills. I can't take that step. And God says, *I know your financial situation.* You may be saying, "I can't volunteer. I'm too busy. There's too much on my plate." God says, *I know that and I'm still calling you to care for others and to serve and to pay the price.* Right here, right now, God is saying *set my people free;* free from despair, free from depression, free from addictions, free from fear, free from guilt, free from toxic religion but the first step is to get out of the boat and walk on water. I feel like I've been doing it for thirty-one years four months and twenty-five days. Sometimes it's been exhilarating; sometimes I've been moving over the deep, barely touching the water, skimming the surface. Sometimes I've been sinking, whether it's attacks from outside or bickering from within the church but God has lifted me up, but let me make this clear this morning. Please hear this: God has lifted me up through you, through you, through your words of encouragement, through your examples of sacrifice, through your stories of survival. You grabbed my hand. In the past it was people like Mitchell Boyd and ? Bassett and Carmen Johnson (sic) and Paul Fairley who lifted me up and sometimes I was paddling



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under the surface like crazy trying to look smooth above the water line while going crazy under the surface like a duck, trying not to show you how hard it was and yet you reminded me not to hide the hard truth and that you would staff and that the staff and the Board and I did not have to do it alone. Sometimes huge waves came and seemed to threaten everything and somehow we got through it and sometimes I came so close to giving up and getting back into the boat. It was so close at times just to settle and say, Jesus, aren't you great – instead of hearing His call and His challenge, but your courage inspired me and the cries of those who need help calls us.

So, Gladwell said it's ability; he said it's a support base, a strong base and he said it's hard work and sacrifice. You can go off that little hill and go plop for your whole life without taking a risk or, if we put in the hard work together we will fly higher than we've ever flown before.

Amen.