

October 17, 2021 | Sanctuary Worship Service

TEXT: [1 Corinthians 2:1–10](#)

TITLE: Intervals of Faith: Major 7th – Expanding What is Possible

By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

There's a great quartet of novels by Marilynne Robinson that explores the lives of two older preachers in a small Iowa town. I recently re-read the first in the series, *Gilead*, and stumbled onto this bit of wisdom from the elderly congregational pastor, the Rev. John Ames. He said, *"There are two insidious notions in the modern world. One is that religion and religious experience are illusions of some sort (an idea taught by Feuerbach and Freud). The other is that religion itself is real, but your belief that you participate in it is an illusion.*¹ Think about that. Some say that all religion is an illusion—a tradition without real meaning, an opiate for the masses, a delusion. That perspective is problematic, but perhaps the worse notion is to tell people that, yes, there is a God—there is such a thing as spirit and faith and true belief; but sadly, you're not a part of it. You may go to church but that doesn't make you a Christian; you may say your prayers but that doesn't mean God listens; you may think you have a connection with the Lord, but that's just an illusion.

Now why would people say something like that? Well, often it is said because the speaker, the preacher, insists that true faith looks a certain way; it involves being in their church, singing and praying and worshiping as they determine is right and worthy. Any approach that denigrates your faith so that their faith can be seen as better is truly insidious. Jesus didn't like it. He said, *If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were fastened around your neck and you were drowned in the depth of the sea* (Mt 18:6). Even Rev. Ames had strong words against this perspective. He said, *You can spend 40 years teaching people to be awake to the mystery [of faith] and then some fellow with no more theological sense than a jackrabbit gets himself a TV ministry and all your work is forgotten.*²

We all have religious experiences. The holy is all around us and we are touched by it, and have experienced it with humility and awe lots of times. It is there inside these walls when you feel connected to a truth and love that is bigger than anything else in your life. It is there outside these walls when the world and all that dwells therein amazes you and evokes your desire to protect this precious life. It is there in the ways you are pulled out of your own little world and pulled into a connection with someone else. Religion—faith in God revealed in Christ—reminds us that we are so much more than flesh and blood, and no matter what jackrabbit preachers may proclaim, you are connected to God and precious in God's sight.

We all have religious experiences—yet some may ask, how do we truly know what is from God and what isn't? Well, the first step is to take a breath and quit telling yourself that faith is some sort of test for which you have to get a passing grade. Trust that you are surrounded and sustained by God's Spirit like a fish swimming in the sea or a bird flying in a Pittsburgh sky. You have been created in God's image, which means you are

made to connect to God—to resonant with the music of God. It's a gift you don't earn—and it is part of God's plan that goes back to the dawn of time. In each of us "deep speaks to deep"; spirit speaks to spirit; love, hope, justice, peace echo within us because they are part of God's world and our world.

This idea is part of a Christian tradition that goes back hundreds and hundreds of years. It's called the "via positiva"—the positive way. It says that there is a connection between this world, the beauty around us and within us, and the greater, more wonderful reality of God in Godself. Because of this connection, we can love now even as one day we'll love perfectly; we can do justice even as one day all relationships will be fully just; we can glimpse heaven in a mirror dimly but it is enough to reassure us, in the words of the apostle Paul, that something "no eyes has seen, nor ear heard, nor heart conceived is real and awaits us."

Earlier I mentioned how the Major 7th interval added a whole new vocabulary into our musical language. It is a part of the sound we associate with jazz. It expands our musical world and we are the better for it. Let me give a different example from the world of astronomy. In March 2009, NASA launched the Kepler telescope into space. It had a fixed orbit and focused on just one patch of sky in the Cygnus constellation. If you extend your fist into the sky, the area covered by your hand is roughly the area studied by Kepler. For most of human history, we believed our solar system had the only planets. But Kepler changed all that. In its eight years of study, it found more than 2,300 planets in that little patch of night sky. We now believe there are more planets than stars in our universe, and many exist in a sweet spot that could potentially support life. The Kepler telescope built on what we knew and then expanded our awareness exponentially—in ways our head or heart could not have conceived possible a few decades ago.

When Paul came to the people of Corinth, their world consisted of earthly wisdom and philosophy. They loved to debate—to ponder the big questions of life. But Paul wasn't going to play that rhetorical game. He shared with them a gospel about power made known in weakness, love revealed in sacrifice, and a Savior who was crucified, buried, and then resurrected. He planted that seed in the soil of their lives, knowing that God had prepared that soil to receive that seed - for there is a spirit within us that is connected to God's spirit. Deep can speak to deep. Paul expanded what they thought they knew so they would be open to a great mystery stretching from the dawn of time to the end of all that is.

There's a famous quote from Antoine de Saint-Exupery, who wrote *The Little Prince*. He says, "*If you want to build a ship, don't drum up people to collect wood and assign them tasks and work to do; rather teach them to long for the endless immensity of the sea.*" Faith is aspirational. It always works better with a pull than a push—from a positive longing for what is just, good and beautiful as opposed to a jackrabbit negative theology quick to push you down and tell you how you're unworthy and unwelcome in God's house.

Errol Garner composed the melody for “Misty” while flying on a plane from San Francisco to Chicago. Garner never learned how to read or write down music, so once the melody emerged in his mind, he had to keep humming it so as not to forget it. The woman seated near him thought his constant humming meant he was having a panic attack so she called over the flight attendant. But Garner had to keep humming until he could get to a piano and embed the melody in his fingers. From that moment, one of the great jazz standards was born—performed by Sarah Vaughan and Johnny Mathis—built around the major 7th interval. And while he wasn’t the first to use that interval, that sound became part of the expansive beauty of jazz and all of us are the richer for it.

Expansive faith is all around us and all through the bible. New members join our congregation and bring with them their experiences, their questions, their unique God-given giftedness and we are the richer for it. In this season of anti-racism and greater sensitivity to the rights of women, Indigenous peoples, and the global majority long marginalized and silenced, we listen to their stories—watch their plays, read their novels, see their dances, hear their songs—and this expansion opens us up to a richness that wasn’t possible before. Like a telescope suddenly revealing planets we never knew existed, it changes our perception of the world. And this deeper faith is possible because it builds on the foundation God established long ago and implanted in each of us. It moves us from where we are to where God wants us to be—and how Christ calls us to live. It resonates with a truth that we can trust—like a jazz chord that sounds just right.

Insidious voices may try to convince you that you are not good and worthy, that your religious experiences are not real because they aren’t like someone else’s. But that’s just not true. We gather in this sanctuary, hearing hymns and jazz standards, and through it all we experience the holy. We pray for the world outside our walls, family and friends, strangers and enemies—and appreciate how faith involves many stories beyond our own, each precious in God’s sight. We look closely at how we live together, weeping for wounds inflicted, wars pursued, resources hoarded or wasted, and we discover how our life is inexorably connected to the larger web of God’s creation. We glance up at the night sky, knowing there are countless stars above and even more planets circling those stars. It is all more than we have ever seen or heard, imagined or conceived. Yet such is God’s plan, prepared for all of us out of love. Deep speaks to deep, to your deep. Let your faith expand; there is so much God longs to show you.

AMEN

¹ Marilynne Robinson, Gilead, 2004, p. 145.

² *Ibid.*, p. 208.