

“Believe It or Not, I Will Show You”  
*“Leave your own country, your kinfolk, your father’s house,  
and go to a country that I will show you.”*  
The Rev. Dr. Joe Kutter

In recent phone conversations with a few friends I was reminded that, over the years, some magazines have published sermon series under the rubric, “If I Had One Last Sermon to Preach.” The question was asked if I might be willing to give that a try. I have an advanced cancer that primarily attacks the gallbladder and liver. Life expectancy for me is now measured more in weeks than months and certainly not in years. I’m weak as a kitten, and my energy level is totally undependable. This is my last sermon.

Since I was diagnosed Maundy Thursday, 2019, I have found that my attention has shifted from our concern about where I will spend my energy in the days to come. I have a few days to come and I have no energy. I have found my attention moving into the land of memories, roots, and origins. I oftentimes wonder how I became the idiosyncratic person that I am. Those explorations have become a centerpiece of my end-of-life spirituality and emotional grounding. So this last sermon will take the form of a testimony, how the strange grace of God led Joe to become Joe. I have three stories to tell, two from my early life, and one not yet completed.

It was 1957. I was seven years old; my sister, Nancy, who had been born with a congenital and incurable heart issue, was four; and my brother was two. Our dad was serving as the pastor of the First Baptist Church of Elliotsville, Indiana. Even though the church had a reputation for being difficult, under my dad’s leadership the church was doing well. Our extended families were within easy driving range, and our nuclear family was content. As far as I remember, we had no intention of going anywhere in the near future.

But then Mom and Dad returned home following a visit with Nancy’s doctor. Use your imagination, and you can now see our world come apart. They were told: “Nancy cannot survive another Indiana winter. Find a milder winter or she will die.”

My parents would leave the doctor and immediately begin to prepare for a move to Florida. That seemed like a really good idea, until you understand that we knew absolutely no one in Florida – not one single acquaintance. We knew virtually nothing about the state except that it was milder than Indiana. Dad was a northern Baptist preacher, and we were moving into southern Baptist territory. Job prospects for him were, needless to say, thin. Mom, on the other hand, was an excellent secretary, and her chances of employment were far better than Dad’s. How, in those pre-Internet days, would she begin her search after we arrived at wherever we ended up? Other than Florida in general, we had no particular destination in mind.

To replace an unreliable car they bought a Jeep Willys – what we now would call a subcompact – to carry our family of five to Florida. Having no place to live, they purchased a 26 foot “house trailer” that now would be considered a small camper. We already knew how to purchase, prepare, and consume meals (Bologna sandwiches) in the car or at picnic tables along the way.

Leaving a place they knew and loved, and in which we all were very comfortable, they set out for a place they did not know. They were reenacting the Kutter version of that ancient text from Genesis 12, where God tells Abram: *“Leave your own country, your kinsfolk, your father’s house, and go to a country that I will show you.”*

That has become the theme verse of my life. It is the text for this testimony.

My parents had one nearly ineffable trait without which they would never have attempted the journey. Embedded somewhere deep within their being, they *trusted* that in some way God would see them through.

It was a tough trust, absorbed from their families of origin, strengthened by the struggles of their earlier life together. They bestowed it to me.

As I look back over the years and think about the very difficult decision my parents made, I want to share an observation or two.

First, there was trust, that ineffable core at the center of their being, that was not a simple thing. It was complex and highly evaluative. The medical staff had carefully analyzed my sister’s condition and had arrived at a conclusion based on the best evidence at hand. My parents trusted the doctors and the process they had employed to reach their diagnosis and recommendation. That is, my parents came to their decision not out of a simple trust in God, but through a complex process of thought, prayer, and discussion. Their intellect was as involved as their meditations. That did not in any way diminish or qualify their trust in God, but instead utilized their whole God-given being in the process of making the difficult decisions they were facing. At this point in my life I am willing to say that making difficult decisions that ignore the role of the intellect, of deep prayer, and the counsel of friends and communities of faith is not a matter of authentic trust but an exercise in “stupid trust.”

A second observation about the nature of trust: who or what you trust really matters. As a generic exercise, trust is in fact a dangerous thing, in that you may trust the wrong thing. Trusting ultimately only in yourself, with your mortality-imposed limitations derived from your own experience and thoughts, may well lead ultimately to decisions that destroy yourself and do harm to others. In today’s Internet age it seems that far too many of us are willing to claim expertise on a host of matters simply because we’ve read it on the web. Or we are willing to listen and trust whatever charismatic leaders say and be drawn into their circle of influence. We give up our capacity to evaluate things for ourselves and with others. Our trust becomes misplaced.

Over time my parents had learned to trust in God, as they had come to understand God through Jesus. “Through Jesus” is the crucial phrase. Without a compelling revealer, a decisive informer, a value-laden manifestation that Jesus plays in Christian faith conveyed in scripture and confirmed by the Spirit in our experience, we subject ourselves to all sorts of nonsense, even evil, all the time claiming that we are trusting in a God of our own making. My summary

is simply this: if it doesn't meet the Jesus test, it doesn't pass muster in developing a trust for a meaningful life.

We made the move to Florida. As we thought, Mom found a job fairly quickly, and it took Dad a good bit longer. He finally became pastor of a little 25-member church just outside of Lakeland. Needless to say, it was difficult.

Two years after our move, a surgeon at Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore developed an open-heart surgical procedure that helped Nancy heal from her condition. Thank God for good doctors and good science. I'm happy to say that she is still with us.

From there we moved to a small farming community called Zolfo Springs, and then to Fruitville, Florida, a small community just outside of Sarasota where I completed my junior and senior high school years.

Following high school graduation in 1963, I accepted a scholarship from the Southern Scholarship and Research Foundation at Florida State University. I moved into a co-op house – the Selby House – at FSU, intending to become an engineer.

I was born to be an extrovert, and it never got better. I remember sitting at my desk and watching my upper-class housemates spend two and three hours working on a single calculus problem, barely moving, staring at the page, I found myself saying, "That does not look like fun!" Reading was fine; reading and talking about it was better, but what was the equivalent of a cubicle experience I could not picture myself doing. So I changed to a curriculum designed for pre-law and became a history major and a political science minor.

With the exception of one particularly difficult course in Russian history, I enjoyed history and for the most part political science.

One more significant event imposed itself on me. Though I never saw myself as a particularly active member of the Baptist Student Union, I was invited to join their staff and move into their house. "Aha," I thought, "a free room and good conversation with good people about religion." I moved in the next day.

Those were the days before the conservative takeover of the Southern Baptist Convention, and the director had a sweet combination of Christian faithfulness and an open spirit that gently began to shape my view of faith. Unfortunately, at the end of the year, he moved on to become a Methodist. My best guess is that his "open spirit" did not fit well with the emerging closed and conservative spirit of the Florida Southern Baptists.

I coasted toward my last semester when "stuff" started to happen. I enjoyed reading history and political science but the hard truth is that neither made my heart sing. The requirements for both the major and the minor were completed so all I needed were three courses for graduation. The months in the Baptist Student Union had prepared me to explore an academic study of religion. So instead of history and political science, I signed up for three courses in religion: a

theology course with John Carey, a Christian ethics course with Charles Welborn, and a New Testament course with Bob Spivey. Each was a world-class scholar in his own right and each had “the personal touch” as a teacher. Each would, over time, become a friend. Suddenly, ministry as a vocation became a living option.

Early in the semester, I received a letter from the Rockefeller Brothers Foundation asking if I would be willing and interested in spending a semester at the seminary of my choice to explore ministry as a vocation. I applied and was then turned down. “Too many applications,” they said.

But then, within a week, I received a letter from Crozer Theological Seminary in Chester, Pennsylvania. I had never heard of Crozer. I had never heard of Chester. And I knew barely anything of Pennsylvania since 1776. I did the research that I could in those pre-Internet days and learned that they had a young energetic, progressive faculty. I accepted the invitation and applied. My Southern Baptist colleagues thought that I had lost my mind, attending what had to be a liberal Northern Baptist school. Perhaps they were right!

I knew how to plan. I would put the study of law on hold and study theology for either one semester or one year. “Just see how it goes,” I said to myself. If ministry was my option, then I would return to seminary and continue toward ordination. If not, I would serve in the military. That was the Vietnam era, and everybody had a chance to serve. And then I would get on with graduate school, either law or maybe seminary. What a planner I was! Now watch my world turn upside down again.

It was to be another version of Abram’s story: “Go from your country and your kindred to the land that I will show you.”

The grand scheme crashed and burned during a revival tour I had signed up for. In one of my six sermons, I included a couple of paragraphs about God’s love and acceptance of all people. It seemed obvious and gentle enough to me. But this was 1969, and racial tension was high, and some folks took it as code – it might’ve been! – for advocating on behalf of civil rights and racial justice. In another of those sermons, I referred more overtly to race relations and racial justice.

In one of the churches on the tour, following one of those sermons, the pastor smiled and said, “There goes your honorarium.” I think I sort of chuckled, thinking it was a joke. But when we got our checks at the end of the week he wasn’t kidding! The congregation had shut its checkbook and didn’t get it out again.

In still another church, following a sermon that dealt more overtly with race relations and justice, we were invited to the pastor’s living room for refreshments. His teenage son was there with us. We were not very far into the conversation when the young man began to berate me for my sermon. Within a few moments he began to refer to Martin Luther King, Jr. as “Martin Luther Coon” while his father looked on with smiling approval.

Those were the two most dramatic responses to my preaching, but over the course of our tour I developed a strong sense that I would not feel at home in any of those churches. Following the

last church, I returned home with a firm decision that seminary was not for me, even if it was for free!

Back in Sarasota, I found a job and made plans to enter the Air Force and apply for Officer Candidate School. Shortly after starting work, I was left in the office to attend the phones while the other workers went out and took care of clients. The phone rang. I answered. And the voice at the other end said, "I'm looking for Joe Kutter."

"I am Joe Kutter."

"Joe, this is Earl Allen, and I am with Crozer Seminary. Classes started last week and we were expecting to see you here."

"I should've written to tell you but I'm not coming", I said.

"May I ask why not?"

"Well sir, I just finished a revival tour and I learned some things. I don't know if I believe in God. I kind of like Jesus but I don't know what to do with him. I don't trust the scriptures. I don't like church people, and I have started to believe the accusations that the churches are full of hypocrisy. I just don't think I would be a very good pastor. And I'm not coming."

To which Earl Allen replied, "Joe, I wish you would come up here. We honor questions like that!"

It was not the response I expected. In my native environment to question God, Jesus, the Scriptures, and the church all in one breath would have met automatic expulsion, especially for someone who might be considering ministry.

I noticed one other dimension to his response. He did not say that those questions were "tolerated." He said that those questions were "honored." He said that a place preparing people for ministry needs to honor conversations in which core beliefs are tested and challenged and where the challenge itself is honored. What he was saying was not a part of my experience and I found it a wee bit shocking!

I cannot remember the rest of our conversation, but I remember the impact it had on my heart and soul: if this is true, then I may have found the right place for me at this time.

As our conversation was winding down, Earl asked, "What do you think?"

"I don't know," I said. "I'll talk it over with my parents tonight, and we can talk again tomorrow if you're available."

As we were talking that night, my mom, ever the practical one, pointed out that Pennsylvania winters and Florida winters are not quite the same. “It gets cold up there, and your Florida wardrobe will never work. You’ll freeze! And, besides, you don’t have any money.”

The next morning Earl called back and asked again, “What do you think?”

I replied, “Earl, my entire wardrobe consist of a couple of pairs of Florida weight trousers, a few pairs of shorts, a few T-shirts, and two collared white shirts. My mom pointed out that in Pennsylvania that wardrobe will never work, and I have no money to buy anything else. Looks like I can’t come.”

Earl said, “Let me talk to Bob Loundes, our financial aid officer, and see what we can do. I will call you back tomorrow.”

The next morning, as promised, he called again. “I talked with Bob yesterday, and he said that he can adjust your financial aid package so that you can buy at least one heavy duty coat, some business attire, and appropriate casual clothing. What do you think?”

“Well,” I said, “we were talking last night and my mother asked if I would need a car. If so, she said, you may be in trouble because your Volkswagen bug won’t make it to Tampa, let alone to Pennsylvania. So will I need a car?”

“Yes you will.”

“Then it looks like I can’t come. I have neither a car that will get me to Pennsylvania nor money to buy one.”

“I will call you back,” he said.

When Earl called the next morning, he asked, “Do you remember Rick Payne?”

“Of course, we played high school football together. He was the star running back and I was the tackle who tried to protect his backside. Rick will make a great pastor.”

“I spoke with Rick last night, and he has a Chevrolet sitting in his Sarasota driveway and has no use for it. He will loan it to you for as long as you need it without charge. You keep it maintained, gassed, oiled, the regular maintenance, and then give it back to him when you don’t need it anymore. You have a car.”

I seem to remember saying something like, “Oh shucks.”

“I’ll talk to you tomorrow,” I told Earl.

The next morning I told him that I would get there as soon as I could. That night we packed my meager wardrobe and the day after I went over to see Mrs. Payne to pick up Rick's car. When she met me on the driveway she looked at me with a gleeful grin and said "He must really want you!"

That night we got out the maps and charted a course from Sarasota over to route 95 north and then up the eastern seaboard to Delaware. Somewhere in Delaware – we weren't quite sure where – I would turn left and find a way to cross the Delaware River into Chester, Pennsylvania.

Three days later, on a Sunday afternoon, I parked in the seminary parking lot and roamed around the empty campus until Dr. Mel Henderson, the dean of the seminary, saw me and came to greet me. He helped me find my place for the night.

And so continued my Abrahamic journey... "to that place where I will show you."

The question is, did Crozer seminary deliver as Earl Allen had promised? Absolutely! And more so.

God: Is there a God? If so, what is God about? Can we pray to God and does God care?

The Scriptures: Are they really inerrant? If they're not, what use are they? Is the church that we have today really the church that Jesus envisioned?

Justice—racial, social, environmental: What does justice look like and what role does the church have in its advocacy?

And the list goes on and on. But over time I began to finally get a glimpse of the core project that nagged at my soul and would not let me go. Who will I become, and what role would I play in the midst of the messes of the world? It seemed self-serving. I prayed it wasn't. And somewhere along the line I came to believe that every person is invited to be idiosyncratic, a one-of-a-kind human being, and every person is invited to bring that distinctive personhood into the world's conversations. That included me.

One last word about Crozer. Martin Luther King, Jr. had graduated from Crozer about a decade before I arrived. His spirit permeated the air. I came to believe that he was an authentic disciple of Jesus. I knew a lot about his sins and flaws, but I concluded decades ago that if God is going to work only with perfect people then the work-pool is going to be really, really thin. Suffice to say that MLK and Crozer have had a profound impact on the way I see the world, and on the way that I do ministry.

So let me set our family's 1952 trip from Indiana to Florida next to my 1967 solitary trip from Sarasota to Chester. In 1952, we traveled as a family. I have no doubt that Mom and Dad drew on one another for encouragement and strength and to bolster their sense of trust. That's who they were, and that's the way they lived. But as I made my way across the state of Florida in 1967, driving north through Jacksonville, Georgia, the Carolinas, and Virginia, through the

District of Columbia into Maryland and Delaware, I experienced a profound sense of aloneness and solitude. For the first time in my life I confronted decisions that were mine and mine alone. Would that tiny hard core of trust that lives somewhere near the center of my soul be reliable?

It seems to me that even though we have been created to live in families and communities, there are some journeys that ultimately we take alone. The journey to Crozer and the quest to find my personal place in this messy world was indeed an almost solitary journey. Did I have friends and encouragers along the way? You can bet your life. But they could not do it for me.

They were essentially cheerleaders who are not allowed onto the field of play.

It's not often in this world, in my experience, that we have to do something totally alone or mostly alone, but when those moments come, they have to be embraced.

Did I have doubts and questions and uncertainties? How does the old quip go? "Is the Pope Catholic?" But without those uncertainties and nagging questions I would have never taken the journey. I've come to believe that doubts, questions, and uncertainties are a part of the trust experience. Without them, we are reluctant to learn and to grow, reluctant to stretch into new territory, reluctant to go to that new place that God will show us, always preferring the comfort of our current location even though that comfort is sometimes a deadly trap.

Sometimes we simply have to embrace the question and the doubt as though we are living in "the land of not knowing" and in our ignorance trust that in some way or another God will take us to that new place that we do not yet know.

Crozer turned out to be that new place for me. President Ronnie Wells, Dean Mel Henderson, Professors Jesse Brown, Snuffy Smith, Ken Cauthen, Don Williams, Bob Macoskey, Ed Thornton, Al Meiberg, Dick Flowers.

It was a remarkable faculty, shaping my experience and helping me form my ministry and understand the world in which I would minister. For the past 45 years I have given thanks to God for these beloved saints, most of whom are now singing in the choir just beyond the river. They all contributed to the places God would lead me – to the land that God would show me in my life of ministry.

One more life-changing experience at Crozer, I met Peggy. Together now we have been married for fifty years, have four grown children who are all doing well, and eleven grandchildren. The whole marriage/parenting experience, that's another unknown land that would require another sermon or 20 to explore. Suffice to say I have been remarkably blessed. Peggy, you know my stories. Remember please, I will love you forever and ever, amen.

During my senior year at Crozer, I was assigned to be the student pastor at the First Baptist Church of Haddonfield, New Jersey. Much to my surprise, it proved to be a nearly perfect fit. They welcomed me, cared for me in remarkable ways, sometimes tolerated me, and gave me a loving start on a pastoral ministry of more than 40 years.



Every church has had an impact on my ministry, and I pray to God that I have made a contribution to those churches. From Haddonfield I was called to Kearny, New Jersey, to the First Baptist Church of Arlington. After that I was called to Michigan, to the Cherry Hill Baptist Church in Dearborn Heights, and eight years later the Royal Oak Baptist Church. Finally, I was called to the First Baptist Church of Topeka, Kansas.

After eleven years in Topeka, I accepted the position of Acting Director of the American Baptist Ministers Council. As the pastor of Topeka, I served as the president of the Ministers Council during one of the most tumultuous eras of our history. The focus was the LGBT community and their role in the church, particularly American Baptist Churches USA. It was a tough season. Becoming the Acting Director, it was my responsibility and privilege to see if we could restore some sense of mutual respect among those who disagreed so violently. After four years in that role, I returned to Kansas and worked with John Williams as a Director of Interim Ministry for the Central Region. And finally, when John retired, I served for ten months as the Interim Executive Minister for the Central Region.

And then it was time to retire completely. But I had no idea that I would get the message so forcefully. Feeling poorly one day I slept in. When I got up, I went to the kitchen where Peggy looked at me and said “You are yellow.” Within an hour we were in the doctor’s office, and within another hour we were at the hospital where several tests were administered, including images of my entire abdominal region. Finally we were sent to St. Luke’s Hospital in Kansas City. April 18, 2019, I first heard the words Cholangio Cancer, stage four, metastasis. The decisive words “No Cure!”

Not long thereafter we visited with our oncologist, Dr. Rigden, to talk about treatment options. We tried to drain bile and bilirubin from the liver without success until finally a third tube was inserted into the liver, and the bilirubin drained, and we had a new opportunity for treatment. The bilirubin level had kept us from talking about chemotherapy, but as it dropped the possibility that chemo might be helpful emerged. We decided to try. If I remember correctly, there was one chance in three that the chemo would be helpful at all, and if it would be helpful it would only increase life expectancy by a few months. It turned out not to be helpful, and we mostly experienced a series of infections, complete with a severe case of septic shock. Finally, with the doctor’s advice, we abandoned chemo to live out our days together.

When we stopped chemo Peggy asked the doctor about life expectancy. Her response, “About six months.” That was in October, about six months ago.

There is no doubt that this last journey “into the land that God will show you“ has already begun. I’ve experienced infections, sepsis, and weakness. I know about nausea and an upset stomach. I know about hospice care, which we are experiencing now. I know pain, opioids and morphine. In fact, I am writing these paragraphs while oxycodone makes its way through my body, leaving me a bit drowsy but fortunately pain-free.

I’m now standing at the edge of the river. From time to time I’ve dipped a toe into the edge and perhaps with the sepsis I was in up to my knees. Now when I think of life expectancy, I think

in terms of days or weeks, but never in terms of months and years. I'm meant to be on the last great journey to that land that God will show me.

I have more encouragers than I can count, but I know that I have to make this trip alone. It is a solitary journey. Questions. Uncertainties. Doubts. I have wheelbarrows full. I am indeed on the way to "The Land of Not Knowing."

And yet, I remember a trip in 1952, and another journey in 1969, and countless shorter trips along the way. Somewhere, somehow, I discovered that at the center of my soul a small kernel of trust whispered over and over again: "God will see you through." I have not run away from the questions nor abandoned the doubts, but neither have I completely turned my back on trust. My finite mind will not wrap itself around the infinity of eternity, as persons of faith, of trust, have always done. I live with metaphors and images: The unbroken circle. A mansion just over the hillside. The roll being called up yonder. I take delight in those old gospel songs believing that they point to a reality in which God's love will be revealed forever and ever, amen.

In recent months I have fallen in love with the Thomas Dorsey gospel song, "Take My Hand, Precious Lord." Like the good psychology major that she is, my daughter asked me why I like it so much. The answer is that song is me. Countless singers have published it in countless ways but when they maintain the lyrics, the story is simply this:

Precious Lord, take my hand,  
Lead me on, let me stand,  
I am tired, I am weak, I am worn,  
Thru the storm, thru the night,  
Lead me on to the light,  
Take my hand, precious Lord,  
Lead me home.

When my way grows drear,  
Precious Lord, linger near,  
When my life is almost gone,  
Hear my cry, hear my call,  
Hold my hand lest I fall,  
Take my hand, precious Lord,  
Lead me home.

When the darkness appears,  
And the night draws near,  
And the day is past and gone,  
At the river I stand,  
Guide my feet, hold my hand,  
Take my hand, precious Lord,  
Lead me home.

God took a trusting Abram's hand and led him to a new home.

God has taken my hand throughout my life and is holding it tight now.

I invite you to that kind of trust – a trust in a God that will hold your hand into that Beloved Community that is the City of God.

*Thank you for taking your time to read this.*

*Joe*