



WESTMINSTER  
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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# Who Packs Your Parachute?

Dr. Bruce Lancaster

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## Who Packs Your Parachute?

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*Psalm 37:1-9*

*Isaiah 55:1-9*

James Moore, a wonderful preacher, tells the story of Charles, who was a fighter pilot during the Vietnam War.

Charles flew 75 successful missions, but on the 76<sup>th</sup> his plane was hit, and he had to eject and parachute to safety. He was captured, spent several years as a prisoner of war. He survived and went around the country as an inspirational speaker.

One day, Charles and his wife were in a restaurant and a man came across the room to him, “Hey, I remember you! You flew jet fighters in Vietnam from the aircraft carrier Kittyhawk. You were shot down.”

“Yes, have we met before?” Charles asked, thinking it might be someone who had heard him speak.

The man said, “I’m the guy who packed your parachute!” And with a big smile on his face, “I guess it worked!”

Charles gasped in surprise and gratitude, “It sure did. If that parachute you packed hadn’t worked, I wouldn’t be here today!”

That night, though, Charles couldn’t sleep. He kept thinking about that man – wondering how many times he might have seen him on the ship or walked past him as just another sailor standing at attention – because Charles was an officer, and this guy had been just a sailor.

Charles thought of the many hours this sailor had stood at a long table on the aircraft carrier, carefully weaving the

strands and folding the silks of each chute, holding in his hands somebody else's life.

It's a good story James Moore tells, and the question explodes out of the telling: Who packs your parachute?

Who's packing your parachute? Who's getting you ready for the critical moments in your life... those decisive moments when your life is on the line? Who is working now so that when a crisis comes in your life, you are prepared, ready to meet the challenge?

Who packs your parachute? This is one of the most critical questions for you to answer, at any age or stage of life, young people, parents, families, older adults, students, singles, married...in whom or what do you put your trust?

Everywhere you go, you can't avoid it; the cry and clamor for our trust is all around us...Money talks that way, the military does, gangs and cliques, alcohol and drugs say it. Material possessions, politicians and government, pleasure and work...Trust me, give me your loyalty, commit to me! Let me pack your parachute!

We're all too aware of the unbelievable agony that comes when people put their trust in the wrong things: their wealth, their jobs, their anger, their fear, emotional reasons, brainless reasons...people choose to trust the wrong things.

This is precisely what the scripture lesson in Isaiah is all about. Look again at verse 2 in our reading from Isaiah, and I like the way Eugene Peterson translates in *The Message*, easy to understand: *Why do you spend your money on junk food, your hard-earned cash on cotton candy?*

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Why do we put our trust in those things that don't satisfy, that have as much substance as spun sugar? Our scripture readings this morning from Psalm 37 and Isaiah ask us to consider just where we place our trust, choosing the packer of your parachute.

I want to say three things about that; first of all, we should be able to trust our family.

I say this, and I'm very aware, some families are not trustworthy. Children today are being left to raise themselves, maybe in a big house, but it's not a home; it's full of stuff to keep them happy, but no parents to give them love. Indeed, some husbands and wives are finding, no, missing the same things in their house.

Listen to Mattie Stepanek's words in his poem, "The Way Home":

*Sometimes the way home is love.  
Sometimes the way home is together.  
And sometimes the way home is  
Not just love,  
But loving each other.  
And sometimes the way home is  
Not just together,  
But together with other people...  
People you love a lot,  
People you like a lot, and  
People you are friends with.  
But all the time, the way home is  
Every good thing that God told us to do.*

It was the first day of summer vacation. The father was getting ready to leave for work. He was trying to be extra

quiet, because all four of his daughters, ages 6 to 14, had talked about sleeping late. Just as he was about to walk out the door, his six-year old came down the stairs.

“What are you doing up? It’s not even 7 o’clock. I thought you wanted to sleep late.” Sleepy-eyed, she held her arms open to him, “I wanted to kiss you before you left.”

What a way to start a day! To have someone pack your parachute by going out of their way to show you how much they love you.

The substantive, fundamental, crucial, basic, essential, critical, vital, indispensable, necessary, (I don’t know how many other ways to say it) the good things for life should be packed by the family.

Second, we should be able to put our trust in the church. As Rabbi Harold Kushner points out, “(The community of faith) offers...a refuge, an island of caring in the midst of a hostile, competitive world.”

Or let’s say, the church ‘should’ offer. Again, I’m very aware the church has not always been that place of love and growth and acceptance, in fact the church can be and has been a hotbed of hostility and abuse.

Ken Medema, pianist/singer, expresses the need of so many lost and hurting people in his song, “If This Is Not a Place.”

He asks for a place, referring to the church, where you can go when you’ve got questions and need answers, when you’re down and you need some help...to be accepted, a place of friendship, as he sings, “*If this is not a place where tears are understood, where can I go to cry? If this is not a*

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*place where my spirit takes wing, where can I go to fly?"*

The best picture I have right now of that kind of place is what I call the church of Mattress Mack. Mattress Mack owns a furniture store in Houston, Texas, and I saw him when we were with family in a nearby city after Hurricane Harvey a few years ago. He opened up his stores to what he calls “my people”, those hurricane refugees for a place to sleep, to rest, to regroup, to be safe, to cry. The church needs to be that kind of a community of faith.

“Who’s packing your parachute?” Put your trust in your family and your church.

Finally, put your trust in God. Or really, not finally, but underneath it all, choose to put your trust in God.

I hear you, though, *“What about all those pictures of family and church in the storm, from the wretched poverty millions face each day, to the wars that continue to rage, to the devastation of the environment?”*

We witness many problems in our world that call us to question how we can trust God. And what about those storms that don’t make the evening news, but people live with them day after day?

When my father was dying of cancer, he was 58; I was 34 and because I was afraid, I asked him, “Dad, are you afraid?” And he answered, ‘If my faith is no good now, what good is it?’”

Yes, he died a few months after that conversation, but he never gave up on God; not always what we want or what we planned for, but a gift of endurance and patience, a sense of



God's presence not just in his healthy past, but intimately around him right then and there, a faith of God at work always.

That's Isaiah's invitation in our scripture lesson to Come...Listen...Seek and find God at work in every nook and cranny of life, packing our parachute every day, holding life together even as it seems to be falling apart.

When we accept Isaiah's invitation, even though we cannot see it all around us, that God is active in every single aspect of life, not just those things we call miracles, but in the multiplicity of simple things in life; it is remarkable how much our lives can become empowered by grace and mercy, justice and kindness and humility.

It makes a difference in your life and mine and very much in the lives of those whom we touch, if you live your life knowing and trusting the one who packs your parachute

TO GOD BE THE GLORY.



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