

A Ledge with a “Wow” View

*Then Moses went up from the plains of Moab to Mount Nebo,
to the top of Pisgah, which is opposite Jericho,
and the LORD showed him the whole land, Gilead as far as Dan.”*
(Deuteronomy 34:1)

A sermon by Siegfried S. Johnson on the 23rd Sunday after Pentecost, **October 28, 2018**
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Chicago’s Willis Tower, built as and still commonly referred to as Sears Tower, has on the 103rd floor a glass balcony called the Ledge. When built it was the tallest building in the United States and today it remains the second tallest. This image shows, at the Skydeck level, a protrusion from the core of the building known as the Ledge. At 1353 feet above the city, the Ledge is a major tourist attraction offering views extending some fifty miles. The Ledge juts out just over four feet from the Skydeck. Walls, ceiling, and floor are made of transparent glass 1½ inches thick, leaving one with the impression of floating over the city.



I saw one image of a wedding on the Ledge, the happy couple their backs against the outer glass wall, joy on their faces, clearly trusting the architectural integrity of the Ledge. I, though, identified with the minister, who seemed only to inch onto the Ledge with his heel remaining inside the core of the building. Just in case.

An official of the project said at its dedication, “*The Sears Tower has always been about superlatives – tallest, largest, most iconic. Today we present you with the Ledge, the world’s most awesome view, the world’s most precipitous view, the view with the most ‘Wow!’ in the world!*” Answering a question about the initial inspiration for the Ledge, he said that hundreds of forehead prints were left by visitors everyday on the old Skydeck windows which were flush

with the core of the building. Printed on the pane was the desire of the people to extend their view, upward, downward, and outward. Well, now, you can leave your forehead print in each direction, even on the floor!

I haven't made it to the Ledge, yet, but it makes me think of a place I've been many times, and look forward to being there again in about five months, the biblical Mt. Nebo. For Moses, Mt. Nebo at the edge of Moab was the Ledge from which he enjoyed the awesome view of that Promised Land which had been in his sights and his dreams for forty years since he led the Hebrews out of Egypt.

Our visits to the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan always include Mt. Nebo, sharing with Moses his panoramic view of the Promised Land. Prominent in our view



is the Jordan River just below, ending its journey from Dan in the north as just below us it empties into the lowest point on the earth, the Dead Sea. Across the river can be seen Jericho, the first city to fall under the leadership of Joshua who would now lead the people across the Jordan River.

What I wish this morning to do, considering these two Ledges with a Wow view, is for us to consider that each one of us stands on a Ledge between *Now* and *Next*, a view of our horizons offering both breathtaking moments of awe while, at the same time being a bit scary, like stepping out onto a glass balcony.

What Ledge between *Now* and *Next* are you standing on just now? Life brings us to many such Ledges of change when the view of what's ahead is filled us with a sense of "Wow." Yet, sometimes that change is so unsettling as to fill us simultaneously with a foreboding sense of "Wait." Wow . . . but Wait!

Standing on the Ledge of Mt. Nebo, perhaps Moses could have used a quote from that philosopher extraordinaire Yogi Berra, who said, "*The future ain't what it used to be!*" No, I guess it's not.

Professional baseball umpire Durwood Merrill tells that during his rookie year of umpiring, he called a game behind the plate with fastball pitcher Nolan Ryan on the mound. The second pitch of the game was so fast, Merrill says he never really saw it. He froze, unable to make the call. Finally, he yelled, “*Strike!*” The batter backed up, spit, looked at Merrill and said, “*Ump, don’t feel bad. I didn’t see it either.*”

We live in a world changing so rapidly that we may recognize only a blur of change, and that can be very unsettling for our clusters of community, whether nations, cultures, businesses, churches, or families. Faith-based organizations are particularly challenged by rapid cultural change since their very DNA is anchored in ancient words and traditions. As the church faces new challenges of how to be the church in a changing culture, churches and entire denominations can feel that they are stepping out onto a glass balcony.

The Information Age has invited us out onto a balcony which seems fragile because it extends outside the core of that which has anchored human communities from the beginning. It’s no wonder we are squeamish to enter. The Wow views offered can be as frightening as they are promising. We live on a glass ledge, entering the most exuberantly creative period in history, a period of intellectual exploration and discovery surpassing all previous standards. The velocity of change is something to take the breath away, yet one suspects it is slower now than at any time in the future.

**Something is being born in the womb of history,
and we’ve not yet named its offspring.**

The question becomes, how might we keep the old, old, story fresh, without sacrificing the core of our identity as Christians, believers in the Triune God and in the resurrection of the crucified Jesus? Does our Judeo-Christian heritage offer a sturdy enough spiritual and intellectual foundation for the church to thrive in times of change, so that glass balconies of change at the Ledges of life can be met “*Wow*” when it is appropriate, and “*Wait*” when that is appropriate. We must consider that “*Wait*” is not only an understandable response of fear, but in the face of some cultural shifts can also be the only appropriate response of faith.

Before I become overly philosophical, let me ask, when was your last glass balcony, Ledge moment holding a mixture of awe and fear, a moment when your forehead was pressed to the glass pane of possibility?

I want to tell you about such a glass balcony moment for me and my family, hoping that my telling of a major life transition will lead you to recall your own. It was July of 1985, 33 years ago. I was a 31 year old student in the Doctor of Theology program at seminary in Memphis. My Master of Divinity degree had focused on biblical languages and I sensed a call to leave theology as an academic pursuit and focus instead on Hebrew language. It was, for me, a Ledge between *Now* and *Next* that meant moving our family from Arkansas to Michigan.

It was a “*Step out if you dare*” moment for Sherry and me, and we stepped out with our two girls,

then 9 and 6 years old, to Ann Arbor in order for me to study with some of the world's best Hebrew scholars. It was *Wow* and *Wait*, and as the glass balcony at first began to crack under my feet, I was beginning to think that I hadn't given "Wait" its due respect.

We left Arkansas with no jobs, taking risks I wouldn't dream of taking today. We loaded the U-Haul in Helena and up the Mississippi River we went toward this place that seemed so foreign. Like Abraham, we felt like "*strangers and pilgrims*" in a land not our own. Who would step out to welcome the stranger?

There were no cell phones in those days. Cell phones alone would have avoided the first crack in the glass, when on the first day we lost Sherry from our little caravan near Effingham when she hobbled, unseen by us, off the interstate at an exit with car problems. That led to a panic stricken hour or two in a frantic search to find her. Which we did.

The next day another, larger crack in the Ledge appeared. Safely arrived in Ann Arbor, our other car collapsed right in the middle a major downtown intersection with a broken axle, holding up rush hour traffic and loading us with more car repair bills we couldn't afford. "*It's a sign,*" I thought to myself. "*The floor is cracking under the weight of my decision. Perhaps we should have waited!*"

The third day was even worse. At the University of Michigan's finance office I learned the student loans I had counted on had fallen through due to a technicality – their error – which had been overlooked previously. Long story short, I learned that I was now responsible for the \$8,000 per semester tuition which, in today's dollars, would be close to \$20,000.

The fourth day was even worse as the Ledge's crack seemed now to go up the walls around us. Under the stress of it all Sherry went down, entering the hospital for tests.

Our journey, only a week before having begun in Arkansas with excitement and confidence, now seemed foolish. I craved a stroke of providence, one person to step forth and embrace the stranger. And, she did, a wonderful angel of a lady. I'll never forget her name, Mary Jarrett, though I only met with her that one time, one blessed time, 33 years ago. In her office at the Rackham Graduate School she listened to my predicament and signed off on a block grant for the \$16,000 of my first year tuition. Suddenly things were brighter! Better than a loan, this was an outright grant.

Also, people from the medical community embraced Sherry. Not only did her trip to the hospital get her back on her feet, she also made connections which led to her being hired at the University of Michigan Medical Center, where she worked for the next ten years, solidifying her career as a Respiratory Therapist.

A couple of months later, settling in to my first semester, First United Methodist Church of Ann Arbor hired me, Senior Pastor Don Strobe offering me a job as Administrator which not only shaped a friendship between us which lasts to this day, he in retirement in California, but also began my path back to the United Methodist Church as a pastor.

In telling my story, I hope you'll reflect on your glass balcony moments when you stepped out onto a Ledge of Possibility. I'd love to hear some of those stories, if you would write them and send them to me.

Ledge moments are also experienced by congregations. Commitment Sunday recognizes that very thing. Christ of the Hills owns a legacy of bold vision. *Wow* and *Wait* are reflexes at every major turn, and we balanced those reflexes two years ago when we embraced a plan for expansion of our facilities put forth by our Long Range Planning Team. As that project nears completion in a few months, we are excited about the possibilities this expanded footprint will mean for our congregation, our community, and beyond as we live into the vision to **Bring in, Build up, and Reach out.**

Thank you for sharing the vision of your congregation, and for your generous giving of your many gifts in support of that vision!