

Leap of Faith 2010: Crossing the Moat

Original user's guide by Dave Schmelzer, heavily adapted by Jeff Heidkamp

How are dreams actually fulfilled?

If you happened to be around our church at all last fall, you might have heard a sermon from a series we did about having “Big Dreams”. The series gained a surprising amount of traction, at least to me. Folks started talking lots about all the good things they would love to see happening all over the world. On one hand, as a pastor, this was remarkably exciting. On the other hand, earlier this year I got the sinking feeling, “these people actually mean it, and I think they might be wondering what to do next?”

Fortunately, some friends of ours from another church threw me a lifeline. Turns out they do have an annual season of faith-filled, hopeful prayer and fasting during the season traditionally called ‘Lent’ (the 40 days before Easter), and they invited us to join in. This seems to fit perfectly with all the big dreams flying around the church, since most of them are what I might call “God-sized” dreams.

A caveat may be in order- perhaps you are not of the personality that imagines high-flying dreams that change the world. In fact, many people aren't, and in general, you folks are the sort of a stable, salt-of-the-earth hard workers that keep the rest of us grounded. At the same time, I might suggest that you have your own set of God-sized dreams that might sound less grandiose. Many people want a rich life full of meaning, deep friendships, healthy family connections, interaction with God, and a satisfying day to day experience. Not to be a downer, but can I just say- there's a lot standing in between you and that hope.

So- what do you say? Let's go for it. I think of so many times in the history of our church when people have experienced the living God in profound, life changing ways.

I think of going through our peer counseling process last winter with two friends. I had for years dealt with, on a daily basis, a deep abiding feeling of hazy, irrational guilt. In the process of praying and asking God for help, that feeling of guilt went almost completely away. I cannot tell you how much better the 12 months since then have been.

Or stories like:

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What are you dreaming for?

The entire tone of the Bible is that there is a living God who actually loves his people and wants to pour blessing into their lives. In John 16, Jesus encourages us very directly:

Ask, using my name, and you will receive, and you will have abundant joy.

Can I encourage you to choose one- or perhaps more than one- dream in God that you would like to ask for during this season? Maybe this is something you have asked God for before, but you feel like your faith ran out of steam. Or maybe you've never quite found the boldness to ask at all!

There is no short supply of the kinds of stories we told above that demonstrate how God has been at work here in our church. And yet, maybe it would help to borrow some faith from other friends. Here are some stories of answered prayers from another church that has been doing this "Leap of Faith" idea for several years

The Leap of Faith was an amazing experience for me. I asked God to give my brother a job (who was unemployed for 2 years) and for my parents/family to find some kind of happiness after a terrible car accident that happened in '03. After the Leap of Faith, in the same week my brother got a job, I got a job and my parents bought a new house—a sign from God that, despite trials and tribulations, he still has enormous blessings awaiting us.

Or:

I prayed that I would be healed from anorexia and am now at a healthy weight and have rejoined the track and cross country teams at my college.

Or:

Saved my aunt and uncle's marriage:

At the beginning of the Leap of Faith, I found out that my aunt and uncle's marriage was unraveling due to an affair. After fasting and praying for 38 days, I was contacted by my uncle. He was about to sign a lease on an apartment to move in with his lover. Before he could sign, he felt an almost audible voice in his head say "stop." He went back to my aunt and started to see how their marriage

could be saved. She found a way to forgive him. He was calling me to find out whether this voice was Jesus. It's been about three years and they (my aunt and uncle) are happily together (and my 11-year-old cousin is doing great). They are both following Jesus now and have, since then, encouraged me in my faith.

Or:

I prayed that God would bring me a husband. Hasn't happened yet. But I can definitely say that God has given me more peace and assurance on this topic than I've ever experienced.

Or:

I was praying for a friend to come to know Jesus. About a year later he did and now he attends the Vineyard too!

Or:

I was in the last year of my job, with no prospects and not even sure I wanted to continue in that path. I also had/ have quite a bit of debt. I prayed for God to give me a job that I would love that would allow me to serve him and to help me pay off my debt. Two weeks before my contract ran out, I got a promotion to a better job. And, to top it off, the job is residential. I have an apartment with all utilities provided! So I can work off my debt! God is truly amazing!

Or:

I found my wife!!!

Also to say, many people haven't had your Leap of Faith prayers answered. That's one of the perplexing and challenging things about faith, isn't it? We put ourselves on the line with it with no guarantees. But many of us find that, if we persevere through all the encouragements and all the disappointments, things very much do take a good turn for us.

Le Que and I (and others) have been praying for years for a friend of ours to be healed from a chronic condition. Though there have been periods of remission, it hasn't yet been healed. Through that time, we've prayed for lots of less-urgent seeming things that have happened, and yet we still don't see our friend receive what we're asking for.

And yet, our friendship is as rich as it has ever been, and in the midst of these unanswered prayers, we have continued to enjoy a sense of God's goodness and peace in the midst of what can be for her a very painful condition.

So, all to say, it may take some persistence and some willingness to risk disappointment, at least in the short term. And the hope is that you'll richly experience God along the way, whatever the immediate "result" of your prayer.

Some even larger dreams for our church in general

As I thought about it, in addition to all the amazing individual dreams in our church, as a group there are also some larger things that we can begin to dream for in terms of our community at large. Maybe there is even a connection between seeking God for our own dreams, and some of the dreams that we could start to hold in common.

One big dream many of us have for our church is that we would be an incredibly financially generous church. On one hand, there is certainly the idea of all the helpful ways we could channel that generosity. But there is an even larger sense in which we want to become generous for our own good. Jesus taught us that "where our treasure is, our heart will be also", as if to suggest that if we begin to give our money generously towards his purposes, there is a deeper kind of connection to him that we could receive. And it would seem, as a starting point for all of our communal dreaming, that a deep connection to the resources of God would be crucial.

A second big dream is for facilities that will enable us to increase our ministry in the community. At the current rate, we will have more or less maxed out our current facility within another year or so. This is true both in terms of the people we can seat in our auditorium (and more significantly, from a zoning point of view, the number of cars we can fit in the lot), and in terms of the space we have to do ministry that blesses our community. There are increasing numbers of ideas for church ministry that we simply don't have the square footage for- food shelf, gymnasium for ministry to teens, and even longer term dreams like extensive ESL services, refugee assistance, and job training.

What is the answer to our facilities question. Is it simply growing here in Waterbury (which would require a miraculous zoning variance from the city along with very creative parking solutions)? Is it a whole new facility? Planting satellite sites? Many of us have strong opinions about all these options- but it seems that the deeper question is- what does God want us to do and how will he provide resources to that end?

As we ponder these possibilities, both for our lives and the life of our church, is there a key to accessing the power of God? It turns out that Jesus teaches us a surprising principle that is key to seeing this power released in our lives.

The Power of Crossing the Moat

We can see this principle initially at work in a story Jesus actually tells as a stark warning:

19" There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day. 20 At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores 21 and longing to eat what fell from the rich man's table. Even the dogs came and licked his sores.

22" The time came when the beggar died and the angels carried him to Abraham's side. The rich man also died and was buried. 23 In hell, [c] where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side. 24 So he called to him, 'Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire.'

25" But Abraham replied, 'Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in agony. 26 And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us.'

27" He answered, 'Then I beg you, father, send Lazarus to my father's house, 28 for I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment.'

29" Abraham replied, 'They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them.'

30" 'No, father Abraham,' he said, 'but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.'

31" He said to him, 'If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.' "

for our purposes here, I'd mostly like to draw your attention to this chasm separating the rich man from Lazarus. That's why he can't get the small thing he asks for in the afterlife (a drop of water) and Jesus' point seems to be that this chasm actually mirrors another chasm that was in place during their times on earth—namely, the gate that separated them.

If I can press the image a bit: Jesus, along with much of the rest of the New Testament, seems to make the case that—if you will—all of us live on an island. And, let's say, this island is surrounded by a moat. On our island is everyone we relate to—our family and friends, maybe people in our church, maybe some really close friends from work. Over the moat is the entire rest of the world. These are people who are, as it were, optional for us. We could take the initiative, say, to meet that person who lives two houses down from us, but we by no means have to. We don't need that stranger to be our friend—we have friends, and they're all on our island.

Jesus seems to make the point that a good deal of the meaning of life, an irreplaceable component of what will fulfill us comes as we cross over the moat in his name.

So, for instance, he says seemingly harsh things like this (from his Sermon on the Mount):

If you love only those who love you, what good is that? Even corrupt tax collectors do that much. If you are kind only to your friends, how are you different from anyone else? Even pagans do that.
(Matthew 5:46, 47, NLT)

I don't think he's saying here that we shouldn't love those who are "on our island." I think he's saying that of course we love those people! But perhaps the real power comes as we start to notice and love people who are over the moat, who are optional, whom we don't need.

In fact, in Jesus' own ministry, this seems to be key. I think of a moment in Jesus ministry when he is powerfully healing and bringing freedom to multitudes of people. About that time, he begins to experience significant opposition. Initially, we might begin to wonder if his ministry is in jeopardy. But Jesus has the ability too look up, to see over the moat, as it were, and to recognize that God could be at work in ways beyond what he could see. Immediately as the pressure is building, we read this in Matthew 9:

35 Jesus traveled through all the towns and villages of that area, teaching in the synagogues and announcing the Good News about the Kingdom. And he healed every kind of disease and illness. 36 When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them because they were confused and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. 37 He said to his disciples, "The harvest is great, but the workers are few. 38 So pray to the Lord who is in charge of the harvest; ask him to send more workers into his fields."

And Jesus then proceeds to send his 12 disciples throughout the country, healing people, setting them free, and proclaiming that God's new day was arriving.

Or, we can think of a moment when crowds have gathered for days, and Jesus' helpers are encouraging him to send the people home to get food. But Jesus understands that there is blessing from God beyond what the disciples can see. While they are worried primarily about their own well-being, Jesus' sees that there is power from God, and he is miraculously able to provide food for a crowd of over 5,000.

Or, we can think of Jesus' last moments on earth, after his resurrection. Nearly all of his ministry had been limited to the nation of Israel. But he suggests that the power of the Spirit, whom he will send, will not be limited to Israel. Instead we hear this:

8 But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you. And you will be my witnesses, telling people about me everywhere—in Jerusalem, throughout Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

And in fact, the entire rest of the New Testament is taken up with all the excitement- and all of the problems- of the church fulfilling this moat-crossing mission.

How can we “cross the moat” together during this Leap of Faith?

First, by praying not only for ourselves, but also for “our 6”.

Our thought is that each person in our church knows at least 6 local people who, as best as we can tell, aren't experiencing much from God. These, for the most part, will be people “over the moat,” people we choose to pray for and love as best we can who are not in our inner circle. That said, if your best friend at work fits this profile, go for it! Put them on “your list of 6.” Largely what we do is pray for these folks that they would experience the power and love of God, and might perhaps even come to follow him themselves—hopefully among a great community of faith! Our theory is: if your impression is that they aren't experiencing much from God, most likely they have no one, or very few people, praying for them. So perhaps you can offer them that great gift!

So, who are your 6?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.

In addition to praying for our 6, we are considering the idea of blowing money, or offering hospitality to them.

But what about this “blow money on—or offer hospitality to—your 6 idea? Here's another parable from Luke that you'll get much more about in the Leap of Faith Devotional. But it's pretty helpful here.

Jesus told his disciples: "There was a rich man whose manager was accused of wasting his possessions. So he called him in and asked him, 'What is this I hear about you? Give an account of your management, because you cannot be manager any longer.'

"The manager said to himself, 'What shall I do now? My master is taking away my job. I'm not strong enough to dig, and I'm ashamed to beg— I know what I'll do so that, when I lose my job here, people will welcome me into their houses.'

"So he called in each one of his master's debtors. He asked the first, 'How much do you owe my master?'

" 'Nine hundred gallons of olive oil,' he replied.

"The manager told him, 'Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it four hundred and fifty.'

"Then he asked the second, 'And how much do you owe?'

" 'A thousand bushels of wheat,' he replied.

"He told him, 'Take your bill and make it eight hundred.'

"The master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly. For the people of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own kind than are the people of the light. I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings.

"Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much, and whoever is dishonest with very little will also be dishonest with much. So if you have not been trustworthy in handling worldly wealth, who will trust you with true riches? And if you have not been trustworthy with someone else's property, who will give you property of your own?"

(Luke 16:1-12, TNIV)

This is one of my absolute favorite of Jesus' parables, because—to me at least—it's utterly shocking. (If you, by any chance, had an interest in hearing a more-full treatment of this passage, you could go to the Boston Vineyard's website, www.bostonvineyard.org, and download or stream Dave Schmelzer's sermon from December 6th, 2006 called "Why Jesus Likes to Mess With Your Head.")

What seems shocking about this parable is that the master commends the "DISHONEST manager." By all appearances, this guy is openly robbing his employer for his own selfish gain. He's buying friends for himself so that, when he is kicked out of his house, they'll give him a place to stay. And then Jesus not only commends this, he amplifies it. "Use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourself, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings." And then his seeming point is that we're all in the position of this manager, managing money that is not our own, that has been entrusted to us to manage by God, the actual owner of all the money we have. And God is looking to see if we manage it well. And the way we'll do that is by extravagant generosity towards people who, otherwise, would not be in heaven. What a twist!

I think of people in our church who have thrown free pancake breakfasts for their entire neighborhoods, or organized wine-tasting parties. Or stories of folks being over-the-top helpful to their neighborhood friends during an illness, or offering much-needed childcare to a harried young family. Some small groups throw hospitality together for their 6's, hosting parties or fun nights together. Our youth group is throwing the net even wider by offering free babysitting to the public at large- quite a risk!

And beyond this, if it seems appropriate, you might want to consider inviting some of your 6 to come to church on easter. It's a popular day for non-church going folks to give it a shot. But, if that seems premature, maybe wait for a better moment. We will, however, provide some simple invitations

Second, by taking an opportunity to be financially generous

Beyond "our 6", there is a whole world of opportunities to share our resources with people in need. On one hand, it can feel overwhelming to think about all the needs that exists. On the other, the spirit of "crossing the moat" would seem to include at least a consideration of all the opportunities there are to bless people financially for God.

To expand on a quote from Jesus that we already mentioned:

33 "Sell your possessions and give to those in need. This will store up treasure for you in heaven! And the purses of heaven never get old or develop holes. Your treasure will be safe; no thief can steal it and no moth can destroy it. 34 Wherever your treasure is, there the desires of your heart will also be.

As if giving financially is one of the keys to receiving a sense of peace and blessing from God.

We will highlight four opportunities for financial generosity over the weeks of the Leap of Faith, and there are certainly scads more than we will mention. For what it's worth, here is our nearly-random sampling of four opportunities:

1. Antioch Ministries: a nonprofit with strong ties to our church that is seeking to raise funds to start two new ministry houses to at-risk youth in North Minneapolis.
2. Compasio (and specifically, Steph Mullen): Compasio is a nonprofit ministry that works to end sex-trafficking, particularly in Southeast Asia. Steph is a member of our church who has recently left to work with Compasio.

3. Compassion International (not to be confused with “Compassio”!) is a very large international relief agency that helps lift children out of poverty in Jesus name. In particular, Compassion offers the possibility of sponsoring a child through a monthly donation.
4. Josh’s crackpot idea.

How can we stay focused on this and keep faith sustained for 40 days?

Consider using the Daily Bible Guide. It’s a short read with some suggestions for prayer, and it explores the book of Luke in great detail in relation to our larger theme of crossing the moat together.

There are at least three benefits to using the guide. First, you will learn a whole lot of new stuff from the Bible. Second, it will help sustain a prayer focus for 40 days. Third, it can help us have a sense of unity as we walk through this season together.

If you want to access the Daily Bible Guide you have several options:

1. Pick up a paper copy in church each Sunday for the following week.
2. Download it from the web site (www.mercyvineyard.org)
3. Sign up to receive a daily email, either by signing up on a sheet in the Cafe or by signing up for the “Daily Bible Guide” group under “Activity Groups” at www.mercyvineyard.org.

One more way we can stay sustained is to share the good stuff God does. If God does something great for you during the Leap of Faith, you could email it to leapoffaith@mercyvineyard.org, or just write it on a sheet of paper and put it in the offering or in the mailbox in the Cafe. We will share these stories throughout the Leap of Faith.

And let’s cross the moat together

All this praying and giving could get tedious if done all by one’s self. And, biblically speaking, it often seems like the greatest blessings are poured out as people begin to pursue dreams in God together. I think of a remarkably powerful prayer meeting recorded in the book of Acts:

23 As soon as they were freed, Peter and John returned to the other believers and told them what the leading priests and elders had said. 24 When they heard the report, all the believers lifted their voices together in prayer to God.

The passage records quite a bit of their very powerful prayer, and ends with this climactic prayer and exciting result:

Give us, your servants, great boldness in preaching your word. 30 Stretch out your hand with healing power; may miraculous signs and wonders be done through the name of your holy servant Jesus.”

31 After this prayer, the meeting place shook, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit. Then they preached the word of God with boldness.

I would suggest that this points us towards the idea of doing this together in a small group. Could I suggest that even if you aren't in a small group at the moment, that you consider joining one just for this 6 weeks? If after that it doesn't seem like something you can sustain, by all means, don't continue.

And in those groups, why not plan a special “crossing the moat” event, where you intentionally seek to find the “optional” people in your lives or neighborhoods, and do something fun to bless them. We will provide small group leaders with a list of ideas. We've seen groups host parties, babysitting nights, open mics, hand out popsicles at the park, serve with various nonprofits around the city, or serve soup to the homeless.

Let's raise the stakes one more level and consider fasting

You might have noticed that when people really wanted something from God in the Bible, they almost always fasted.

What does fasting do?

Fasting tells God and our own spirits that we really are desperate for God to meet some need or hope that we have.

Though fasting—in any fashion (and we'll talk about some options in a minute)—is, by definition, hard, it's actually meant to be a joyous opportunity. Suddenly we're really serious about something with God; we're really expecting him to come through; we aren't just playing around. That can often be exhilarating!

What are options for fasting?

Well, first off, fasting often involves abstention from food in some way. In shorter fasts, that can be a total abstention from food. These are usually called “water fasts,” because water is the only thing going into us. For the most part, I don't recommend these at any length beyond a week's time, because after that, health problems can

ensue. (Clearly God can speak and call you into anything—but I’d just be aware of the risks if you water fast for more than a week, and be in good touch with a doctor.)

Also, I do not recommend water fasts if you’ve ever suffered from an eating disorder. Those in our midst who’ve suffered from eating disorders historically have a difficult time separating this sort of fasting from the very motivation that drove them to the disorder, and thereby risk serious health problems. There are other great fasts that will do you a lot of good, if you’ve been in this situation, and can I ask that you’d pursue those?

Other food-abstention fasts involve imposing some sort of conditions on our eating over a period of time. (Some folks prefer not to call these “fasts”—reserving that title for water fasts—but prefer to call things like I’ll suggest here “consecrations.” Choose whatever terminology works for you!) This can involve anything from giving up some beloved food item for a time (desserts being a popular favorite) to something more challenging, like the so-called “Daniel fast,” which involves (as it did for Daniel in the biblical book bearing his name) abstaining from everything but vegetables.

For longer fasts, I’ve sometimes done a “one meal a day” fast. It’s pretty much what it sounds like. The key is to actually eat a smaller meal than you normally would at the time, and to make that “it” for the day. People often pursue “juice fasts.” Again, this would customarily apply to shorter fasts, but it’s just like a water fast, except you’re allowed to drink juice, which will keep your blood sugar up and actually allow you to function at near-normal capacity.

Are there any non-food-related options?

You bet! Fasting from television is a popular choice for folks who aren’t fasting from food.

These can really involve, under God’s direction, doing without anything that feels costly to give up for a season. I’ve heard about fasts (or, again, “consecrations”) from criticism or from catalogs!

The point of fasting is that, under God’s direction, we’re feeling desperate for something and we direct that desperation towards God. It’s just hard to truly be desperate for God and what he might do for us when our bellies are full and all our needs are abundantly provided for.

What does it mean to fast “for” something?

If you fast, I'd encourage you to let God know, frequently, what it is you're fasting for which, I'd think, would at least tie into the "what do you want Jesus to do for you during the Leap of Faith?" category. Early in the life of our church, I regularly fasted simply that our church would actually come into existence and survive. It would seem it worked!

Wow, there's a lot here. How about a quick summary sheet for your refrigerator?

Leap of Faith 2010: Crossing the Moat

How might we seek God in faith for our God given dreams together?

1. Pray!
 - a. Pray for a personal dream.
 - b. Pray for God's blessing on "your 6"
 - c. Pray for two big dreams for our church
 - i. That we would be a very financially generous church
 - ii. That we would get guidance from God for our next facility decision
2. Consider "blowing money" or showing hospitality towards your 6.
3. Use the Daily Bible Guide (pick up in church or access at www.mercyvineyard.org)
4. Consider joining a small group, and join that small group in crossing the moat at least once during the Leap of Faith
5. Ask God if there is a way you are to grow in financial generosity, perhaps in one of the ways highlighted at a Sunday service
 - a. Antioch Ministries
 - b. Compasio (Steph Mullen)
 - c. Sponsoring a child through Compassion International
6. Think about fasting during the Leap of Faith
7. When cool stuff happens, email it to leapoffaith@mercyvineyard.org

Here's to a great 40 day of seeking God together