

## ***Loneliness and the Development of Faith***

According to theologian James Fowler, in his 1981 work *Stages of Faith*, there are six distinct stages of faith (see inset below). Beginning in infancy – when we tiny humans develop our basic concepts of trust, love, and safety – and continuing through childhood, adolescence, and into adulthood, faith is always developing and changing to adapt to our developing and changing realities. Perhaps the most important transition is the one that occurs between stages three and four, when we as believers move from a group-identified faith into the development of our own personal faith. We do this work on our own, for the most part, and it can be a lonely experience.

The characters in *Youth* find themselves at this crossroads, where they must each decide for themselves what faith means for them and how it fits into their lives. This fourth stage is often precipitated by a significant life event – an accident, perhaps, or the end of a relationship – prompting us to reconsider our beliefs up to this point. Our faith continues to change throughout our lives, and this re-evaluation and re-examination must recur along with it. Pastor Dave and his young charges begin to question what they see and what they believe when Wyatt, a newcomer to their group, exhibits struggles with his own ideas and expectations of faith.

Within the Christian tradition, the faithful believe that the greatest connection to God is through Jesus. God is a confidant and strength through all things, and even when distanced from those around them or losing faith in other aspects of life, one can always rest assured that God will never forsake us. Loneliness, among Christians, can be based around a loss of

this relationship. Losing this connection is a devastating and bewildering experience. One may feel prayers are going unanswered – or worse, unheard – and that no one is listening to cries for help or mercy. In *Youth*, we see varying levels of this disconnection and disengagement. This sense of rejection can sometimes correspond with a drifting away from the institutional church. However, this rejection of the institution, with proper individual guidance, can also lead to the development of a more mature personal faith.

Christians are called to community worship, that is, worship in physical proximity with others, lifting and supporting one another in faith. While the experience and expression of faith is ultimately one's own, and deeply personal, that faith can only be strengthened by having others around who share it. *Youth's* regular meetings are, as Pastor Dave calls them, a “spiritual support group” for the young members, who are potentially facing many challenges to their faith in other parts of their lives.

Finding ourselves in congregation with people who are assumed to have a strong faith, when we have questions that we cannot answer, can contribute to a deeper isolation. In crises of faith, Christians are encouraged to not sink into this isolation and are reminded that even the most faithful believer has also experienced these doubts. For example, in Hebrew Scripture, Job, during the worst of his abuse and afflictions by the Devil, feels abandoned by God, saying:

He has alienated my family from me;  
my acquaintances are completely estranged from me.  
My relatives have gone away;  
my closest friends have forgotten me.  
My guests and my female servants count me a foreigner;  
they look on me as on a stranger.  
I summon my servant, but he does not answer,  
though I beg him with my own mouth.  
My breath is offensive to my wife;  
I am loathsome to my own family.

Even the little boys scorn me;  
when I appear, they ridicule me.  
All my intimate friends detest me;  
those I love have turned against me.<sup>1</sup>

In the New Testament, Jesus expresses doubt in God calling, “Why have you forsaken me?” as he is being crucified.<sup>2</sup> His words call back to Psalm 22, one of many in which the Psalmist, David, wrestles with his own desire for a more intimate connection with God. The first verse of Psalm 22 continues:

Why are you so far from saving me,  
so far from my cries of anguish?  
My God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer,  
by night, but I find no rest.<sup>3</sup>

These ancient laments have many similarities to modern loneliness at its core: simple estrangement from our fellow human beings – Job’s family, intimate friends, and even acquaintances all abandon him— and seemingly even God. David also conveys the physical effects of loneliness, the sense of pain and exhaustion. Job seeks connection to bolster his faith. He, and David, seek a sign that God is still watching over them.

Within *Youth*, we also find several characters who, whether they realize it or not, are seeking deeper connections with God, in part to relieve their loneliness, but also to give their lives purpose and meaning. Rather than isolate themselves in their confusion, playwright James Ijames allows his characters to gain strength in themselves and their faith through each other, leading to deeper and stronger individual relationships with God.

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<sup>1</sup> Job 19:13-19

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 27:46; Mark 15:34

<sup>3</sup> Psalm 22

TEXT INSET:

**The Six Stages of Faith**

- 0) Undifferentiated Faith (Infancy)
- 1) Intuitive-Projective Faith (Early Childhood)
- 2) Mythic-Literal Faith (Childhood)
- 3) Synthetic-Conventional Faith (Adolescence)
- 4) Individual-Reflective Faith (Young Adulthood)
- 5) Conjunctive Faith (Adulthood)
- 6) Universalizing Faith

***Stages of Faith (1981)***

**James Fowler, Theologian**

SPECIAL THANKS:

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