

By Faith: Still Seeking the Promised Land

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Hebrews 11: 1 – 16

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In this series of “by faith” we’ve been remembering. We first remembered Rahab who, when given the chance, acted by faith and so, even though a harlot and a foreigner, is etched into the very genealogy of Jesus. We remembered the story of a man of our time struggling with an addiction who knocked on a church door, having seen a light shining out of a window of a church, and the seminary student who opened the door. The miracle—both were led to ask, “What are you trying to say to me, O God?” By faith, both believed God cared enough to speak to each one of them that night.

Next week, we will remember those who have helped us in the ways of faith, those who have passed on and those who are still on this earth in our celebration of All Saints Day.

Today we find words that speak of faith as an unending journey. The scripture calls those who believe “strangers and foreigners on the earth” who never receive the promises, but desire a “better country.” These, who are forever alien to this world, are the same ones for whom “God is not ashamed to be called their God.”

The writer, oh let’s call him a preacher, for you can hear him preaching in the cadence of what we read today. The preacher in Hebrews calls out Abraham as one who left his homeland “by faith” and never did get to settle permanently upon a land he would call home in this world. The preacher celebrates that Abraham is a homeless wanderer saying he got to live in the land of promise but only as a foreigner, living in tents.

Recall again, Hebrews is written to a community of Christians under duress. Those who first hear these words are tempted to leave behind the faith so they could live more like everyone else. Their situation was, likely, more dire than is ours. Lives were on the line. But, still their temptation to give into the culture around them sure sounds like the temptation we often face.

We are meant to be “aliens” the preacher of Hebrews says. It is the way God first worked. It is the way God formed God’s people, with one man who was willing to leave his home.

The preacher’s words reach into the deepest identity of God’s people, an identity deepened by a creed spoken in worship long before his time: “When the priest takes the basket from your hand and sets it down before the altar of the LORD your God,” speaks Moses to the Israel in Deuteronomy, “you shall make this response before the LORD your God: ‘A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous (Deuteronomy 26: 4-5).’”

They, like Abraham, are the first called out, the first to leave their homeland. As the first Christians of their town, they are aliens, strangers, but, we know, they will become a great nation, mighty and populous, a faith that is known throughout the world.

Well, we are no longer the first. Christians sure have their place in the world. And yet...

As you all now know, it is covenant season around here. It is a strange request, not many churches require it of their members, to ask you to pray and fill out a covenant form every year indicating what God is calling you to do “by faith.” It is possible that our covenant, in a very real way, alienates us from the people around us. Every “yes” means to something else we say “no.” One of our members wrote a friend on Facebook in response to an invitation to participate in a Sunday morning event that “I would like to but we go to church on Sunday mornings.” Another member called up a friend to ask if their boys would like to join her son at our midweek program called Logos even though she knew her invitation may not be gratefully received. She was not put off by what was a probability, choosing, instead, to believe in the possibility. And a man, who enjoys his football, chose to lead Bible Study rather than watching the Monday night game, a choice he has made for over 10 years!

Moved by the Holy Spirit such people are the life blood of Christ’s church. You will find pastors celebrating such people in every living church. They are old, they are young. They are women, they are men. They are rich, they are poor. They are working people, they are retired. They had horrible childhoods, they had the best of childhoods. They struggle mightily with the questions of faith, they simply believed. They have visions, they seek understanding through science. They are on both sides of the political aisle, both sides of every culture war we face. What they all have in common is they all choose to be Christ’s church above all else.

A man I know was divorced and parented his children on the weekends. He worked long hours. Yet there was something solid about him, something of Jesus. People noticed, his soft voice, his kind eyes, the way he lingered. So he was asked to be a Deacon, to attend a monthly meeting and do the jobs that make worship possible. He was asked 2 years in a row and 2 years in a row he declined. Those who submit names for the Deacons did not give up. They asked him again. And, the third year, he surprised me, by saying “yes.” When asked why he decided to do it this year for it was clear that his life hadn’t become any easier, he said, “I’m tired of saying no. I want to say yes to my church.”

You who have been members for awhile know well that church life does not always fulfill our needs or our wants. It is not always a heavenly vision we find as we try to be the body of Christ. Yet there is no other city, no other community, whose architect and builder is God.

In Resident Aliens Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon argue that the church’s “main political task ... [lay], not in the personal transformation of individual hearts or the modification of society, but rather in the congregation’s determination to worship Christ in all things” (p. 45).

We who choose to be Christ’s church, make that our first priority, are indeed outsiders. I think many of you enjoy that status, though you might prefer the term “outliers.” But let’s be honest about the struggle. It is easy to proclaim a love of Jesus, to talk about how you are growing

spiritually. It is hard to make the commitment to love Jesus enough to allow him to be, as Hebrews proclaims, our high priest, the one for whom we sacrifice, our Lord. It is hard, for example, to write in that covenant “I will worship every Sunday except for the times, which I will choose to limit, when I’m too far from here.”

Does that sound too small for you who like big challenges; for those of you who are the movers and shakers of this world or maybe simply the mover and shaker of your own world? Do you now want to know what it is we are going to do, pastor? Do you not want us to work out a Mission Statement...we are about “Making Disciples or Changing Lives.” Do you not want a measurable outcome? Not long ago some of you had a pastor who said to you forget about trying to change the world, learn how to be the church. The measurable outcomes were how many of you were willing to commit to worship, to prayer, to being one another’s mentors, to reading scripture daily, being in a Bible Study—with a band of disciples with whom you worship, to retreat together, to participate together in hands on service-programs such as Logos and Open Arms, and to loving one another, as Chip aptly put, “No matter what.” You were changed. When I arrived I noticed that people shared deeply with one another. You trusted each other with the worst and best of yourselves. You made your Bible Study the priority because you counted on those people and they you. You honored one another’s faith, telling me about him and her and what amazing things they have done. You were able to see beyond the broken promises to the vision of how God had crafted each soul. You were able, you are able to do these things, not because of the greatness of a preacher, but because you are willing to make Jesus your Lord and offer your best to him, the first fruits of your commitment.

The challenge is to be Christ’s church. You don’t come to worship or a Bible study because it is convenient or easy or even fun all the time (though most times there’s a lot of laughter and inspiration); you come because you made a difficult commitment for Jesus to be Lord over your life; you come because you are the church, here, with these people. “The most credible form of witness,” speaks Hauerwas and Willimon, “is the creation of a living, breathing, visible community of faith.”

Faith is the reality of things hoped for, the proof of things unseen. By faith, Abraham left his homeland and never returned for he “looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God.” By faith, she who was as good as dead, gave birth to a nation.

This reference to Sarah foreshadows what is to come in Jesus, “the pioneer and perfecter of our faith,” the one who dies, suffers the indignity of the cross, and so gives birth to a nation. Sarah was as good as dead. Those who know the story (and if you don’t, no problem, you can read it yourself by starting in Genesis 16—you’ll be reading along with our Sunday School, for this is exactly where they are in the Bible), know she laughed when she was told that she was to have a baby. Long before the day she was told she was to have a child, she believed she was too old, beyond child bearing. It seemed to her that the promise God made to Abraham was a promise that did not include her. In her state of unbelief, she had her slave woman Hagar go to Abraham and him go into her, and Hagar gave birth to a son Ismael. The story of Hagar and Ismael deserves its own sermon. But for today, note the story reminds us that what complicates our lives are those times when we act out of unbelief.

Sarah was as good as dead. It is a hard state in which to live, to believe that somehow you’ve been left out of God’s promise. There is no better country for you. God isn’t your God.

That is the pull of gravity that surrounds us; that which would pull us, who are meant for heaven, back down to earth. That is the sin that began the day Adam pulled the apple from the tree. We too quickly decide that “it is what it is” and it is our job to accept we are people of this world. Forget about the stars of heaven, the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore. Your faith gives no life. You are barren.

The spies came to Rahab’s door...God knew where to send them. The man, down and out, saw a light in the church window...God knew how to show him the way. The young seminary student opened the door...God knew she would. “Sarah,” God spoke to the girl hiding behind the door in the shadows, “it is you who will give birth to the promise.”

Where do we become part of God’s story? Where do you find people who believe they have the responsibility, the right, the joy, to journey towards the promised land? Where do you find the community that puts its trust in Christ for its very existence? Where do we learn the lesson that faith brings life from apparent death?

You are the church!

Anne Lamott, in *Travelling Mercies*, gives thanks for the priest she called up one day when she was at the end of her rope; the priest who first said he was on his way home but after listening to the silence on the other end decided to stay late. His choice and his ability to truly hear her, eventually befriend her, enabled a bit of God’s light to enter in and it was enough to keep her soul alive. God knew he’d stay.

Anne Lamott writing after 12 years of being part of Christ’s church reflects upon her relationship with this priest. She reflects through God’s story, through scripture, a story in which she now finds her own. She writes, “Slowly I came back to life. I’d been like one of the people Ezekiel comes upon in the valley of dry bones—people who had really given up, who were lifeless and without hope. But because of Ezekiel’s presence, breath comes upon them; spirit and kindness revive them” (*Travelling Mercies*, p. 44).

Christians become part of God’s continuing story of creation and redemption when they become Christ’s church.

To be Christ’s church requires we sacrifice. To be Christ’s church requires we inconvenience ourselves. To be Christ’s church is to show up even when we seem unnecessary to the story. To be Christ’s church is to believe God is pleased to be our God.

To be Christ’s church is to be the reality of things hoped for, the proof of things unseen.

I’ve seen your joy. I’ve seen your faith. And I believe...
The Lord is risen...