

Faith that Follows

Nancy and I have looked forward with great expectancy to this first Sunday with you. Many of you are aware of Nancy's Alzheimer's disease, which has presented increasing challenges, and never more so than last night, which we spent in the emergency room in UW Hospital. Nancy's resting now at home, having been treated for a urinary infection, and I'll try to do my best this morning after having had about an hour's sleep. But by God's grace, let's hear the word of the Lord:

Hebrews 11 is a great passage about faith. Abraham takes center stage in this chapter of faith heroes. Both Jesus and Paul refer to Abraham as the father of all who believe, and the example of saving, obedient faith (John 8: 31-59; Romans 4:1-25).

Genesis 12:1-4 is the historical narrative, and the New Testament reflection is Hebrews **11:8-10**.

“By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he stayed for a time in the land he had been promised, as in a foreign land, living in tents as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God.” This is the word of the Lord.

One of my favorite gadgets is a GPS navigational system, which has in most cases faithfully guided us to our destination. I don't know what I'd do without my GPS affixed to my car windshield! I need something or someone to guide me to my destination in unfamiliar places.

As I begin my service as your pastor, I realize my need for God's guidance in my life and this ministry. You too, possibly in the light of looming decisions or changes of direction, or just everyday life, need dependable guidance. Abraham's example shows us that...

Faith follows despite the unlikely. God *chooses the unlikely*. He takes the initiative and calls Abram to follow and to become the father of a new nation, his people. There is no logical reason why God would call Abram to be the father of his covenant people. And we can say the same thing about our own calling. Scripture consistently reveals that God takes the initiative toward us, and that there is nothing we have done or could ever do to merit God's free gift of new life.

There are many factors in the choice of Abram that are consistent with Paul's observation that God chooses the weak, lowly and insignificant in order that his

power and glory might better be seen (1 Corinthians 1:26-31). God called Abraham to become the father of a nation, his covenant people. Abram was 75-years old and his 65-year-old wife, Sarai, was barren! He was already “drawing his Social Security.” Abraham had to make a 500 mile journey with his family, leaving all that was familiar. It does seem that God could have been a bit more “logical” in his choice the father of his new nation! No doubt Abram wondered, “Why me?” I have to wonder the same thing as I think of my calling to be your pastor.

Faith follows when *God promises the unlikely*. To this unlikely pagan, God made an unlikely promise—that he would be blessed and that he would be a blessing (Genesis 12:2). God was calling Abram into a personal relationship of faith. This is the eternal life that we have through faith in Jesus. It all begins, continues and ends with the grace of God, proffered through what would take place some 2,000 later, when the Son of God would be crucified on a cross. As Jesus himself said, “Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; he saw it and was glad” (John 8:56). “Abraham believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness” (Genesis 15:6; Romans 4:3, 20-25; Galatians 3:6). So, Abram was blessed with God’s free gift of eternal life, by believing in Christ *to come*, just as we are blessed with eternal life by believing in Christ who *has come*.

The Lord promised Abram that all peoples on earth would be blessed through him (12:3). Abram was called to be a conduit of God’s grace and blessings to God’s people. And you and I who are saved by the same grace share the same calling. We have been blessed in order to be a blessing. We are not cisterns of God’s living water, but are to be aqueducts, through which his blessings flow to others. I pray the Lord will use me and all of you to fulfill his unlikely promises to be a blessing to others who need to know him. How unlikely at my age that this lifelong Baptist become the pastor of a Presbyterian church! But God gives grace for faith to follow him despite the unlikely.

Faith follows despite the unknown. "By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going" (Heb. 11:8). By faith he went out into the unknown. Abraham's father had moved the family from a place called Ur, Abraham's birthplace, somewhere roughly around modern-day Iraq. And they were living in a place called Haran at the time God called him to leave the security of the family place to venture toward the unknown.

Faith that follows trusts and perseveres. Hebrews 11:9 tells us Abraham "stayed for a long time in the land he had been promised." He didn't go as a tourist. He was ready to stay where God sent him. And sometimes it's a greater “step” of faith to remain where we are, amidst difficulties and discouraging circumstances, than to step forth on a new venture. Faith steps out to follow Jesus, despite the unknown factors. We don't know specifically where he will lead us, but we do know that at all times he will be with us.

For the most part, immigrants and refugees venture forth not knowing where they will eventually end up. Our text says Abraham “obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going.” A new employer can be very thorough in describing your work assignment, but you probably won’t know what you’ve gotten yourself into until your first day on the job. Your pastor search committee informed me as much as possible. But basically I didn’t know where I was going, or what I was getting into when I accepted this position as your pastor. And you don’t know what you’re getting into either! In a sense, as pilgrims all of us are clueless as we begin the life of following Jesus. It is so easy for us to forget we are just refugees and fugitives. Two years ago, having lived almost nine years in Belgium, we had no idea about our new home in Madison, Wisconsin until we arrived here.

Faith follows God, despite the unknown, and follows promptly. The Greek in the Hebrews 11:8 text underscores the immediacy of the verb “obeyed,” indicating “a very prompt obedience.” Abraham obeyed while the call was “still sounding in his ears.” “By faith Abraham *obeyed when he was called...*” (ESV). When God calls we don’t have the luxury of waiting until all questions are answered and security is assured. Jesus is worthy of our best and immediate obedience (Luke 9:57-62).

Faith follows despite the uncomfortable. Genesis 12:8 describes how Abram pitched his tent in this new, far-from-home land. “By faith he (Abraham) stayed for a long time in the land he had been promised, as in a foreign land, living in tents....” (Heb. 11:9).

Faith that follows demands that we make our home in the Promised Land like strangers in a foreign country, i.e. in tents. Commentators suggest that the closest equivalent might be those staying temporarily in refugee holding camps, such as Syrians along the border of Turkey, or like refugees in warring areas of Africa, staying in temporary settlements.

Faith that follows is for the vulnerable. Abraham’s obedience took him into a strange and even a dangerous land. He faced immediate famine and also the opposition of foreign kings (Genesis 12-14). He soon realized how vulnerable he was. Because of my commitment to be my wife’s caregiver and my calling to be your pastor in unknown territory, I feel very vulnerable!

We believers have learned from our Lord that this world is not our permanent address. It’s a fallen, unredeemed world, and society apart from Christ is under Satan’s reign. Jesus said because of that, we, his followers would suffer, as he did, the rejection, hostility, and opposition of the world (John 15:18-16:4). We are redeemed people, living, loving, and serving in an unredeemed world. We are not immune from its suffering, hostility, and dangers. God may call you, even as he does many of our missionaries, to serve him in what, by all human measures, is

a dangerous place. And in our life of following Jesus, we are vulnerable to painful experiences, suffering and grief.

And each one of us is called to follow Christ in a cruciform life of constantly dying to self and sharing in Christ's sufferings. The protection promised in the Psalms is not to be understood as shelter from temporal trials and dangers, but rather as the security of our faith that holds on through life's storms. The will of God is safe only because it's the place where Sovereign God wants us. And he'll not allow anything to happen to us that will harm our relationship with him, or that will hinder our service to him, and rob us of the opportunity to glorify him. If we are stricken by what the world deems as tragedy, it is because of the permission of a perfectly wise, loving and all-powerful God, who knows what is for his glory and our eternal good (Romans 8:28).

Faith follows Jesus despite the unfulfilled. Hebrews 11:10 tells us that Abraham, in his obedient faith, "was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God." Abraham discovered that life has its disappointments. God called Abraham to go and possess the Promised Land. Yet, during his mortal life, as Stephen said in his sermon to the Sanhedrin, God "gave him no inheritance here, not even a foot of ground" (Acts 7:5).

Abraham learned to look for a future and permanent City, one that had foundations, and that would last forever; one that was being built in his heart and in the hearts of all of God's people, citizens of God's eternal City. We'll not be motivated to give ourselves steadfastly to the work of God until and unless we have this eternal perspective (1 Corinthians 15: 58). The greatest leaders in social reform and those who have done the most for this world have been those whose permanent address is in heaven, serving and obeying God for time and for eternity. What we do for Jesus and only what we do for Jesus will truly last.

As believers, who like Abraham, are looking for the Eternal City, we are bound to be disappointed with the events, material possessions and outcomes of this life. But also we'll never be fully satisfied with our spiritual life in this world. This is because all that God has called us to and for cannot be fulfilled in this life. The possession of the promised blessings to Abraham took place in the lives of his offspring, reaching all the way to Joshua, Jesus, and to those of us in the New Covenant. I still cannot be reconciled to Nancy's incurable and debilitating illness, but I can say we have been forced to find an eternal perspective as we're being weaned from temporal plans and expectations.

CS Lewis wrote, "If I find in myself a desire which no experience in the world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world" (Lewis, 287).

But also, faith that follows experiences present blessings. "By faith he (Abraham) made his home in the promised land...." (Hebrews 11:9). Our Promised Land

doesn't await eternity. It's living in the abundance of Jesus' life now. Canaan and the Promised Land in Scripture don't primarily represent our blissful resurrection in the redeemed heaven and earth. By faith we now participate in the spiritual blessings of our Promised Land, i.e., the Kingdom that is both within us and around us. Let's not forget that, as far as this world and culture are concerned, we live in God's "Tent City".

Although Abraham had his testing times, his life had eternal significance. What greater life could there be than to be the friend of God, and on the very cutting edge of his work and purposes in the world? Grace enables us, even in times of physical and emotional discomfort and uncertainty, to be "happy campers."

When we returned to the US about 20 months ago, the first thing I purchased after we bought our new car in Wichita, Kansas, where we had things in storage, was a GPS navigator called a Tom-Tom. That amazing piece of equipment navigated me all the way to Chicago, and through its maze of streets and on to Madison. But the Tom-Tom had limited or obsolete data, and had difficulty getting us to our house, and even guided me to a roadway close to our house that was marked, "No vehicles allowed." My old GPS didn't get me all the way home. (I have a newer navigator called a Garmin, but it tells me that Dale Heights Church is on the wrong side of the avenue!). We are all given God's infallible GPS, and he will see us all the way home. He's the infallible Navigator of our lives. I ask you to join me in faith to follow Jesus as we journey together.

Peter Marshall, the great Scottish Presbyterian preacher and former Chaplain of the U.S. Senate, who had an enormous influence on our presidents and other political leaders, related his testimony in a message titled "Under Sealed Orders." As a young boy living near the coast of Scotland, he would watch the Royal Naval destroyers lift anchor and launch out to sea. Young Marshall learned that the ship's captain would have received an envelope that would contain the ship's mission and destination, after the ship had launched out into the unknown. In much the same way, Peter Marshall received his call to go to America for theological training, not knowing where he would live, who would support him, where his ministry would take him. But God had plans for him beyond his greatest dreams.

Marshall closed his testimony by saying,

*"Though you may not know what will be your harbor,
You will know your Pilot, and all will be well" (42).*