

Sermon for August 11, 2019
Hebrews 11: 1-3; 8-18; Luke 12: 32-40
St. Andrew Presbyterian Church
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Being Like Abraham

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts always be pleasing to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

In today's verses from Hebrews, we are presented with the epitome of faith, Abraham. Yes indeed, Abraham was faithful, but this Sunday I cannot read about Abraham without thinking of one of my favorite stories in the Old Testament: the story of Jacob wrestling with God in the night. To be honest, that is where I have found myself in my faith journey from time to time, even now, wrestling with God, asking God, "If you are really here, if you really care, if you truly are a loving God, then why did this happen or why didn't that happen?" I know in my head that tragedies, violence, accidents, diseases, and disasters are not of God or from God, but I wish in my heart that God would somehow stop them, both personally and corporately.

Maybe my struggle is a sign of the times because what we used to place our faith in without qualms has come under fire and suspicion. Remember how we used to trust whatever came out of the mouth of Walter Cronkite? Many no longer trust reporters at all. Remember when we would cling to whatever the President said? Many no longer trust the President, politicians or Congress. What about pastors of old that we held in high esteem? Many no longer trust churches or ministers. Many no longer trust the medical establishment. Many no longer trust policemen. Many no longer trust anything institutional. Many no longer trust their neighbors. Some even don't trust family. It's a very different world from the one in which I grew up.

What is it, then, that we can completely and assuredly place our faith in? Jesus says most definitely it is not in our possessions, not in other people, and not in ourselves. Clearly, our theology and our scriptures tell us it can only be God, Abba, Yahweh, even when we cannot see the answers, even when we cannot grasp the evidence, even when we move ahead into the unknown, as Abraham did.

I cannot think of a better definition of "faith" than the one given by the author of Hebrews: "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." That definition undergirds our belief in God—the one whom we have not seen (yet) but confess is real. If we are honest, though, we will admit that sometimes that trust wavers, that sometimes it collides with current events, that faith can be like a wave that ebbs and flows, which means that faith isn't so much a destination, a final arrival point where we can say, "I've achieved it," as much as it is a process.

It's easy, though, to forget the process of becoming more faithful. Our lives are, for the most part, comfortable just the way they are. We come to this building, and we sit in our favorite spot week after week, and we settle in to worship God; but *faithfulness* often requires the opposite of comfort and settling in. If we think we are already there in our faith, that we've arrived, that we know all we need to know, we risk getting too comfortable or even apathetic; we risk falling asleep and failing to be ready—which requires action--as Jesus warns in the gospel today. As long as we are on this earth, our faith journeys are not done.

I've read this passage from Hebrews numerous times, mindful that Abraham was the hallmark of a faithful person for the Jewish people. And rightly so. Abraham, minding his own business, hears a call from God to get up and go, and Abraham does so, no questions asked. Abraham moves at God's request, trusting that God will tell him where to go, which God does. Abraham waits when the Lord is quiet and acts when the Lord speaks. He holds on to the promise of numerous descendants even when he cannot see them. We all can learn something from Abraham.

But what also struck me this time as I read this passage is that while this letter invites us to reflect on Abraham and inquire about our own willingness to act on God's behalf, it also reminds us of those early believers who "confessed they were strangers and foreigners on the earth" and who were "seeking a homeland" and who desired a "better country," a kingdom country. Their faith had a purpose, God's purpose. They did not believe in order to feel better about themselves or secure their place in heaven; they believed in order to do God's will. Those who "died without seeing the promises" were on a journey, just as we are. Being faithful is not settling in our pews each week but stepping out to join that same pilgrimage.

Do you remember the scene in *Indiana Jones and The Last Crusade* where Indiana, fleeing from his enemies, has to cross a chasm to reach the Holy Grail? Nothing but a deep, wide, dangerous crevice sprawls between him and the other side. The grail is waiting, it's within his grasp, if Indie will just move to the other side.

Indie can't go back because danger lurks there. Yet, how can he possibly go forward into a yawning abyss? So, we watch him reach down and pick up a handful of stones. He throws them ahead of him, over the cliff, but they don't fall. Instead, they land just inches below the level of his boots, on an invisible footbridge. Finally, slowly, purposely, because he believes so strongly in his mission, Indie closes his eyes, lets go of fear, and steps out. And voila! A stone paver appears beneath his foot, then another one, and another one, creating a crossway all the way across the chasm. Indie claims the grail and saves the world because he had the faith to take the first invisible step.

That movie scene is not a bad image for facing life's challenges or obeying God's directions. Often there appears to be no way forward, but God knows the way. It just

hasn't been revealed yet. Faith is continuing to believe that God is good, that Jesus is Lord, even when everything around us points to the contrary. So what do we do in those uncertain times when our faith seems to be at low tide? How do we practice faithfulness? We take the first step forward and keep on moving.

One of the means the writer of Hebrews uses to drive home his argument for faith is to give a lengthy list of examples -- a "hall of fame" as it were -- in the rest of Chapter 11 of people from Israel's history who, through faith, acted in ways that showed they trusted God. They simply believed, trusted God, and got on with it.

Noah built the ark. Abraham left for a new country. Moses led Israel out of bondage. Rahab sheltered Hebrew spies. David killed a giant. Later on, Mary said yes to bearing God's son. Joseph took his new family to Egypt. The disciples dropped their fishing nets and followed. No big deal. They didn't procrastinate, agonize or rationalize. They, regular folk like us, simply got it done.

Having faith in God is part of the equation; *being faithful* is the active response. And often faithfulness is simply the process of putting one foot in front of the other, of doing the things we know we are called to do, because we've heard it in the gospels our whole lives, whether we want to do them, or not. Surely Abraham at his old age didn't want to leave his home. Moses made it clear he didn't want to be the champion of his people. I doubt Joseph expected to leave his livelihood and go to a foreign country, but all of these people did what God, who they could not see, asked them to do. They did it in partnership with God, trusting that God would give them the resources they needed.

And I wonder. Would God have asked *these* people to do God's bidding if *he* didn't also have faith in them? Remember, we are in a covenant relationship with God, a two-way partnership. If we want to have faith in God, we also have to be ready for God *to have faith in us*. I cannot speak for you, but that makes me wonder how much faith God has in me and how willing and ready I am to get up and get out of my comfortable place into a world, into a society, that so desperately needs to believe that God is present, God is good, and God is in charge. When I want to ask God where God was in the face of misery, perhaps I should be careful because God may want to ask me that same question. Am I willing to take my place in the pilgrimage to a "better country," as the author of Hebrews puts it, by stepping out in faith to do the things Jesus modeled for us to do? Isn't faithfulness part of the equation when Jesus says, "Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit"? Isn't faithfulness doing what we know through the gospels we are called to do: feeding the hungry, welcoming the outcast, visiting the sick, forgiving our brother or sister, speaking out against injustice, racism, violence, and oppression, and creating relationships, as well as being faithful and present to those we love?

Brothers and sisters in Christ, we are not called to be perfect, but we are called to be faithful. To put our faith in God into faithfulness is the action that makes the kingdom of

God, the “better country,” possible, here and now. May God increase our faith, and may we increase our faithfulness.

Amen.