

Faith for the Long Haul

Genesis 15:1-6

Crossroads Christian Church

Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16 August 7, 2016 Pentecost 12C

My dad had wanderlust. He was orphaned in his childhood and was hustled off from one distant cousin to another, working hard on their farms. His dream as a child was to be like Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn, to go to Hannibal and build a raft, and drift down the Mississippi. You would think that serving in the Navy during World War 2, on Atlantic convoy, then flying submarine patrol on a bomber up and down the coasts of the Americas would have cured the wanderlust, but it didn't. He came back to Iowa, to his wife and 3-year-old son, and settled down to work in a factory. But then he heard that another factory in a town 150 miles away was hiring, so we packed up. Then we headed to Colorado Springs, ostensibly because of my allergies, and we dearly loved Colorado, but dad kept discovering that we couldn't eat the scenery and he would have to move back to Iowa to find decent work. He was a hard worker and a good worker, but he was restless. Time after time, we would pack up what little we had and moved, because the grass seemed greener somewhere else. That's why I went to nearly a dozen public schools in half a dozen towns during my grown-up years, because my dad would get that faraway look in his eye, and we'd end up tagging along after. I loved my dad dearly, and this isn't complaining or asking for your sympathy, for I had lots of wonderful experiences along the way. But I just wanted to let you know something of what it's like never to feel quite at home anywhere, to look at it one way, or to be at home everywhere to look at it another. I'm sure that you who grew up as military brats or preacher's kids could tell the same kind of story back to me, only more so.

Maybe because of that personal history, our scripture texts today touch home to me, because they tell us that as God's people, we're all wayfarers, all pilgrims, all resident aliens, all the new kids on the block, all strangers in a strange land. If God is our home, we're never quite at home anywhere else.

Abraham and Sarah, as they were later called, were old and settled when they first received God's call to go and find a land and an inheritance that God had promised them. They had wandered for years, moving slowly, taking their whole household and flocks with them as gradually they moved west. And gradually they got even older. They had been promised a child—children—descendants—and nothing had happened. So, as recorded in Genesis 15, God appeared

to Abraham in a vision, and said "Don't be afraid." That's because even then an encounter with the living God was awesome and frightening, but also, God may have also been telling Abraham not to fear that time was running out for their promise. Don't worry about the clicking biological clock, so close to midnight. So Abraham spoke boldly, and said that his chief servant, Eliezer of Damascus, was his heir, since they were childless. God drew Abraham's attention to the starry night, and asked him to count the stars. "They're countless," said Abraham. God replied, "So will your descendents be." Every Christian, Muslim, and Jew on this planet is a living testimony to the truth of God's outrageous prophecy to Abraham. They would eventually find the Holy Land, but in a sense their journey would never end, because it would become their children's journeys, then their grandchildren's, until today we're still on that journey of faith, following God into the future. "And he believed the LORD; and the LORD reckoned it to him as righteousness."

Many centuries later, the writer of the New Testament book of Hebrews picks up on that theme. It was written to Jewish Christians at a time when the fires of enthusiasm for their faith in Jesus were starting to die to embers. Their passion for the Messiah was cooling off. After all, they had expected that Jesus would return in power and glory within a few months, or maybe a few years after his death and resurrection. But decades had passed. Almost all of those who knew Jesus in the flesh had died. Was the promise true? Should we give up? They wondered. The book of Hebrews was written to help these believers to recharge their spiritual batteries, to help build a faith for the long haul, no matter how long that haul might be. And since every Jewish Christian knew the story of Abraham and Sarah, and the long years that they had followed God before their first child was to be born, why not begin there? The book of Hebrews calls them to faith in God's righteousness—that is, God's goodness and faithfulness, God's desire to have a right relationship with all God's children. Because of their faith, they were righteous; they followed God's will, and they received the promise. The lives of Abraham and Sarah's children were difficult, but in spite of it all they hung tight to the faith that God had called them. Whether they were in slavery in Egypt, in exile in Babylon, struggling against enemies in their own land, ruled over by foreign powers, they hung in there. They were faithful to God's promise, even when external evidence just wasn't there. Do you see the point that the writer of Hebrews was making? Be like your Jewish ancestors. Don't give up. Be strong, be stubborn, be resilient, be totally committed to God's promise, to God's coming reign. Believe and trust in God's love, even when the world is crumbling around you, even when evil seems to have triumphed. As the poem by James

Russell Lowell goes, "Though the cause of evil prosper, yet the truth alone is strong; though her portion be the scaffold, and upon the throne be wrong; yet that scaffold sways the future, and behind the dim unknown, standeth God within the shadow, keeping watch above his own."¹

Again, the message is this: live as Christ would have you live, bold, free, loving and generous, trusting in God. Hang in there during tough times, rejoice during good times, aware that in all times God is with you. Trust in the promise. This is true for us as individuals, it's also true for us as a congregation. Remember verse 9 of Hebrews 11? "Because Abraham had faith, he lived as a stranger in the promised land. He lived there in a tent, and so did Isaac and Jacob, who were later given the same promise." In other words, they didn't have a permanent place to live, but they wandered, always seeking to go where God might lead them. Four hundred years later, and for many centuries after that, when they fled from Egypt, the Hebrews would worship in a big tent, the Tabernacle, which they would pitch for days, months, or maybe even a year in the same spot, until the pillar of fire or cloud of smoke would cause them to pack up and move. We have been a church "on the move" through space and time. Think of the buildings we have occupied not as buildings, but as "tents," as temporary places. The building at Washington Street at Belmont in East St Louis was one of our tents; the buildings on West Main Street in Belleville was another; This building we sit in today here in Caseyville is another; all are tents along the way. We have wonderful memories of the buildings of the past, and we love our own beautiful building, but they're still tents; still way stations on our journey of following God. As Avery and Marsh sang in "I am the Church," "The church is not a building, the church is not a steeple; the church is not a resting place, the church is a people!"² Like Abraham and Sarah, like the Hebrews leaving Egypt to return to the Promised Land, like Jesus and the disciples, wandering and teaching through that land, like Paul and the other Apostles spreading Good News into the world, we too are on a journey of faith. It's tougher to be a successful church than it was half a century ago; but maybe God isn't calling us to be successful; God is calling us to be faithful.

You have a wonderful legacy of being a generous and caring church, a church with a passion for mission. As you plan for the future, do it fully trusting in God's care and good will for you. Don't look back to the good old days and say that things were better then. Instead, look

¹ James Russell Lowell, "Once to Every Man and Nation," 1845.

² Richard Avery and Donald Marsh, *The Avery and Marsh Songbook*, Proclamation Productions, 1973.

around and look ahead to discover that God is on the path with you,
walking beside you and leading you forward. Amen.

by Michael E. Dixon