

Genesis 15:1-6

Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16

Preached at Stone Church of Willow Glen by Rev. Evie Macway

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Faith... Longing... Restlessness

What is faith? “Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”

The letter to the Hebrews was written to a church in crisis. Authorship is debated. It may have been written by Paul. More likely, it was one of Paul’s followers. Based on some of the things said in the letter, most scholars agree that the audience, the first recipients of this letter, were second generation Christians. People who had not directly witnessed Jesus’ life and ministry and who were beginning to face some new challenges to their young faith. This question of what is faith, what does it mean to be faithful was feeling more complicated. The author of Hebrews was seeking to address those concerns.

It seems that some of the first hearers/readers of this letter were having trouble holding on to hope when Christ did not return immediately following the resurrection, as they had expected. Hope and faith were wavering. Some of the faithful were beginning to die. What did the promise of the resurrection mean for them? Was this faith of theirs for nothing?

In addition, as the church grew and became more a threat to the culture around it, many were beginning to suffer persecution because of what they believed. What was to become of the church? Why did the faithful have to suffer? This letter to the Hebrews was written to offer hope and encouragement in the face of severe challenges to the faith, both the kind that come from inside and out. Followers of Christ questioning our faith, began almost as soon as our faith began it seems.

The author here in Hebrews offers encouragement through stories. (As I mentioned last week, one of my favorite mediums) First he tells the stories of Abel, Enoch, and Noah and their faith (their stories are in the verses we skipped between 3 and 8) before arriving at this story of Abraham, what one commentator I read this week

called ‘the example par excellence’, Abraham, the patriarch of the nation of Israel.¹ These stories would have been part of the culture of the early Jewish converts who followed Jesus, part of the fabric of life, like our stories of George Washington, Sojourner Truth, Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King Jr.

The author of Hebrews here focuses on two vignettes from the life of Abraham. First, is Abraham’s response to God’s call to go. Abraham demonstrated his faith by going to the place God called him to go, sight unseen. This great obedience never really paid off though, during Abraham’s life. He never possessed that land of promise. Instead, he and Sarah, dwelt there as a foreigners, living in tents, waiting their whole life, as it says in verse 10, “For the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God.” Abraham and Sarah waited his whole life for the real dwelling place, the real inheritance, the city built by God him/herself, but they never did attain it.

Second there is the story of God’s promise of, ‘the power of procreation’. God promised to Abraham and Sarah, a child and descendants, "as many as the stars of heaven and as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore." All of this despite the fact that as the author of Hebrews puts it, they were, (and I love this line in verse 12) ‘as good as dead’ . The child, Isaac, is born to them but they would not live to see the multitude that would come.

Do you remember the play, Hamilton, the Tony winning hip-hop musical written by Lin-Manuel Miranda that tells the story of founding father, Alexander Hamilton, that came out a few years back now?

When it first came out one of our daughters, Emily, really got into it. I eventually saw the play and read the book and enjoyed both very much, but because of Emily’s early passion for it, our family listened to the entire script and had several discussions on the message and the impact of Hamilton.

There is one line that came up many times in our conversations, that came back to me as I reflected on this story of Abraham and Sarah here in Hebrews. As Hamilton lays dying after being shot by Aaron Burr he sings, “Legacy, what is a legacy? It is planting seeds in a garden you will never get to see. I wrote some notes at the beginning of a song someone else will sing for me.”

This is faith. Planting seeds in a garden you will never get to see. Writing notes at the beginning of a song someone else will sing for you. It is not only believing, it is

¹ Amy L.B. Peeler, http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2943

trusting. And it is living into that trust. Sometimes with your whole life. Even when you will not live to see how the story turns out. “The conviction of things not seen.”

Abraham is a common choice when talking about faith both in the Old and New Testaments. Abraham and Sarah’s lives, as told in our scriptures, were quite literally a journey of faith. They were willing to set out in obedience to God’s command, not knowing where the journey would take them. They were promised a homeland, a very real world, physical ‘better country’. They were promised children and grandchildren, descendants, ‘more than the stars in the heavens’. And they followed God’s leading. For most of their lives they were living, breathing examples of faith as, ‘the conviction of things not seen’. “Planting seeds in a garden the would not see.”

So it makes sense that the author of Hebrews would chose to talk about Abraham and Sarah when trying to make faith real. What is so powerful is how the author chosed to tell it.

What I hear in this telling, is the *longing* of Abraham and Sarah. Faith is not only believing and trusting in God, it is also longing -- for life, for change, for justice, for peace. And it is the longing that brings the faith to life.

The author of Hebrews writes, Abraham and Sarah stayed in the land they had been promised, *looking forward* to the city that would have its foundations on God. The verses talk of Sarah’s barrenness, in the language of scripture, a strong reference to longing for life one does not have. We feel the yearning of both Abraham and Sarah for what is not yet. They trust in God, most of the time, and they lean into the future they envision. One of the most powerful dimensions of faith is the longing.

I read an article not long ago in *The Christian Century* by a Lutheran pastor and author, Dr. Robert Saler. Saler articulates well this importance of longing in our faith. He writes:

When we cry out in rage at injustice or mourn in the face of loss, we are affirming that the act of crying out is not in vain. When we long for a life beyond what seems possible, we bear witness, however tentatively, to the reality of such a life. When we become so resigned to the world of pain that we no longer bother to yearn, when we become so cynical that flat

silence becomes the only authentic way of being in the world -- then we've lost something essential to our humanity.²

This quote really rings true for me as we struggle with how to help our nation be a nation of care and trust and community instead of one of hate speech, gun violence, fear and division.

And Saler concludes:

During the days and long nights when the positive connotations and content of faith seem far away, it is a comfort to hear God's word itself testify that longing is its own kind of faith -- and that restlessness in this world might be the way the world as God will make it, enters our lives.³

The story of Abraham and Sarah reminds us not to give up on our restlessness. Not to give up on our yearning for peace, for community, for justice. Not to settle for flat silence, but to yearn, to pray, to act on 'the way of the world as God will make it.'

The final verses of our reading for this morning make reference to the heavenly city and concern for life after death. This was a concern of the first recipients of the letter to the Hebrews. They were expecting Jesus' return in their lifetime and now some of them were dying before Christ came again. What was the point of this faith if we all die?

This makes the author's point all the more poignant. He says in effect, 'don't worry. God has prepared a city for them.' But in the mean time, don't give up your yearning. Don't give up your restlessness. Be like Sarah and Abraham. Plant gardens. Write the songs. Sow words and deeds. **Let the vision you hold for what can be, for the world as God will make it, change your life. This is faith.**

May we be restless, faithful people in our world today.

² Saler, Robert. *The Christian Century*, Living By The Word.

³ *ibid.*