

## **Faith is the assurance of what we hope for.**

*A sermon preached in Christ Church, Sheridan, MT, by the Rev. Bruce McNab  
12<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost. Proper 14, Yr. C. (Texts: Gen. 15:1-6; Heb. 11:1-3, 8-16)*

I want to show you something. Here's a Bible. *This* much of it is what we call the "Old Testament," the Hebrew Bible, the Bible of Jesus and Peter and Paul and the first Christians. The most important human character in *this* Bible is the man called Abraham. Three great religious communities – Jews, Christians, and Muslims – revere Abraham as their primary spiritual ancestor. Did you know that? Christians take Abraham as the example of what we mean when we talk about *faith*.

As the story goes, Abraham was born and lived for the first part of his life in a place called Ur, one of the oldest cities we know about. We don't know what Abraham did for a living there, but he seems to have been a city boy, not a country boy. Maybe he was a gentleman farmer, or a merchant, or a potter, or a banker, or a camel trader. Nobody knows. We *do* know from the Bible that he had an elderly father named Terah, a wife named Sarah, and a nephew named Lot who lived with them because his father, Abraham's brother, had died. But Abraham and Sarah had no children of their own. Abraham had made money; but he had no heir to whom to leave it all.

One day Abraham had an experience unlike any he'd ever had before. He heard *God* speaking to him! We don't know HOW Abraham heard God, but the Bible tells us what he heard God saying: "*Leave this place, your family and your father's house, and go to the land which I am going to show you. And I will give you that land to be a heritage for you, and I will make you a great nation. Your descendants will be as numerous as the sands of the seashore or the stars of the sky. I will bless you to be a blessing, and by you shall all of the nations of the earth bless themselves.*"

Well, Abraham packed up his wife and his old father and his little nephew Lot and they just left Ur. I wonder what the neighbors said when Abraham left his family home and his established business, and just took off. Maybe, "That man doesn't even know how to *ride* a camel or put up a tent, and there they go!" And what did Abraham say to them? It's not an everyday event for most men to tell their neighbors, "I'm moving away because God told me to. Yes, that's right; GOD spoke to me. God told me to pack up and go to, uh...somewhere. *Somewhere*. He's going to tell me when I get there."

Neighbors with common sense—who recognize the value of order, stability, and a dependable income—are usually a little put off by settled, prosperous, middle-aged businessmen or farmers (or whatever else Abraham might have been) who tell them that they've "*heard God!*"

And such people tend to become particularly skeptical if their formerly very sensible neighbor not only says that he has "heard God," (which is pretty out of the ordinary, after all) but that God has told him to sell his house, close down his office, liquidate his business, pack up his family, and go to some as yet *unidentified* place which God says that he will point out later.

The Abraham story is important to us because although Abraham obeyed God and left his hometown, it was a long time before he got to the place God had promised to give him. A *really* long time. And it was an even *longer* time before the child of the promise was finally born to Abraham and Sarah.

Other than Jesus, Abraham is the great hero of the Bible. And not just the Old Testament; the New Testament points to him as the perfect example of faith and obedience. (Those two qualities always go hand-in-hand.)

*Please hear this:* There's a message for you and me in the story of Abraham and his journey to the Promised Land. And the message is that you can go your own way, or you can follow *God's* way. You can make your own plan, or you can stick to *God's* plan. You can trust your own wisdom, or you can rely on the recorded wisdom of the saints who have already made this journey. You and I have a choice. We always have a *choice*.

Abraham had a choice too. When God spoke to him, Abraham could have said, "This is nuts. It's just a dream. There can't be anything to this. Why on earth should I leave behind everything I've built to follow a dream?" —But Abraham believed God, and so he acted. He believed and he obeyed. He had faith. You might say he sold his office building on Main Street and his pretty ranch just outside of town, bought himself a Winnebago, and hit the road—for the rest of his life. Now *that's* obedience.

*Faith is a decision.* It's a choice. The opposite of faith isn't doubt; it's *certainty*. As the Bible tells us today, "Faith is the assurance of what we hope for, the conviction of what we can't yet see." Abraham heard God calling him to set out on the road to an unknown destination. He had no GPS. No map. There were no road signs. Travel directions would be supplied by God on an as-needed basis. Did Abraham worry? Did he have doubts? You bet! Lots of doubts. (Just read Genesis.) But doubt can be the midwife of faith. —*By faith*, Abraham spent a lifetime on the road.

So, what is God's call to *us*? Is God speaking to you and me about where he wants us to go with our lives? God is speaking to us. Are we listening? Jesus has given voice to God's call to you and me. And this is what he's said: "*Follow me. Follow ME!*"

Jesus came to Peter and Andrew as they were casting their nets in the Sea of Galilee, and he said, "*Follow me!*" He came to James and John, who were in the boat with their father, and he said, "*Follow me!*" He came to Matthew the tax collector, sitting at his desk, and he said, "*Follow me!*" They didn't ask him, "Where are you going?" They just dropped everything and *went with him*.

The first disciples learned the lesson of Abraham. On the way...through a lifetime...Peter and Andrew and James and John and Matthew and the others learned what the journey was all about. They learned to live in faith and hope—just like Abraham. They learned the law and the language of the Kingdom of God along the road, on the journey, following Jesus. And that's what God is calling us to do: discover the meaning of the Kingdom of God as we follow Jesus!

A sermon needs to be at least a little bit practical. So, let me ask you: In *practice*, what do you think it means to follow Jesus? I don't think it's mainly about Sunday church attendance. That's good, but it's not the main thing. Following Jesus is not mainly about religious practices. It's about *believing* Jesus, *trusting* Jesus, *obeying* Jesus — pondering his words, patterning our life according to his example, yielding ourselves to his Spirit, and expecting that *as we do this* —step by step, day-by-day— one day we'll wake up and realize that we've crossed the frontier and we're living in the Kingdom of God. —But we weren't aware of exactly when the cross-over from the kingdom of this world to the Kingdom of God happened. We just woke up and said, "Hey! We're there!"

Remember Jesus' first words in the gospel lesson this morning? "*Fear not, little flock, it is your Father's good pleasure to GIVE you the Kingdom.*" The Kingdom is God's gift to us, but we don't know exactly when we're going to receive it. Or when we're going to enter it. We just keep believing and moving on.

Here's my point. You've probably already guessed it. *It's in the journey itself that we find the destination.* It's in believing God, staying on the road with Jesus, moving on, moving on, that we

discover, all of a sudden that we've entered the Kingdom of God. We're in the Promised Land — regardless of where we might be on a map of the world. But we can only *live* in that Kingdom if we keep moving on, trusting God to give us directions for the next day's journey.

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