

ST. THOMAS EPISCOPAL CHURCH
KNOXVILLE, TENNESSEE
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FAITH SOJOURNER (Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16)
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I was once in a church meeting where a speaker began his remarks by saying, “I hate to use what has become a cliché, but we’re inviting you to join us on a journey.” Maybe you, too, think of that phrase as a cliché: “come on the journey.”

OK, so *perhaps* it’s overused. Personally, however, I think that there is truth imbedded in it. You see, I do believe that life is a sort of journey.

There are psychologists who view how we as individuals perceive this journey as one of the ways they use to differentiate different personality types. For some people, they say, the destination is everything. “Gotta reach that goal.” Nothing wrong with that, we say, as long as we don’t take it to the potentially destructive point of “the end justifies whatever means we take to get there.”

For other people, our friends say, the destination doesn’t matter; making the journey is what matters. “Let’s see what’s out *there*.” Again, we say, nothing wrong with that either—as long as we don’t take it to the potentially destructive point of “whatever results from my journey is good as long as I don’t get hurt.”

Most of us are not on either of those polar extremes. But I’ll bet that you can think about your personal preferences and place yourself somewhere along the continuum that runs between them.

Me? I’m a journey person. I’m the sort of person that would be reasonably happy packing the car for vacation, backing out of the driveway, looking around and saying something like, “Hmmm . . . West sounds good.”

It drives some people nuts. (Ask Gail.)

Holy Scripture has a lot to say about journey, however. Talk in small groups in church about “faith journeys,” for example, however possibly cliched through overuse, is in keeping with what the Bible has to say.

There is no faith apart from journey. Faith is not a static state or some specified entity we capture within our soul. To possess faith is to journey, not aimlessly, but at the invitation of God.

Abraham is our faith pioneer who ventured into an unknown land and an uncertain life, but he went nonetheless, because of God’s call. “By faith Abraham obeyed, when he was called by God to go out. . . . By faith he sojourned in the land of promise,” living in tents during his life journey. The tent symbolizes the temporary and fragile nature of our earthly existence.

Another way that we might understand the description of Abraham as a sojourner is to think of him with our contemporary expression “resident alien.” Abraham was called to journey to a country that he did not know, for a purpose that he could not comprehend. The call is further complicated when he is told that, even though he is very old and his wife long past childbearing years, he will become the progenitor of an entire race of people!

Like most of us, I have some knowledge of reproductive biology and I think I understand where Abraham is coming from here. “What? What that’s you say? Get serious, Lord. Ain’t no

way!”

But, wonder of wonders, that doesn't seem ultimately to have mattered to Abraham. For his final answer is, “I shall obey. I surely don't understand. I guess that I don't have to. I shall obey.” Off to the tents and the fulfillment of God's promise.

Like Abraham, we too are on a lifelong faith journey. We, also, are “resident aliens.” We are born, and God immediately reaches out a hand and says, “Let's take a walk – *together*. Come *with me* on a journey.” And that, whether we like it or not, is a matter of faith. By faith we view the place of promise, though we cannot lay claim to it while we camp in our earthly skin.

That's a fearsome thing to comprehend sometimes, I think. We are comfortable with the past because there resides the things we know. The past is secure because we have lived it. Even if what we have experienced is painful and ugly (and what life does not contain at least some of that), it is familiar—it is ours. And we hold on tenaciously.

What the author of the Letter to the Hebrews is saying as he sets the example of Abraham before us is something quite different. It requires us to change our perception of God and ourselves. And we *all* know what we think about change. (Well, you know the adage about change, don't you? *Change is inevitable – except from a vending machine.*)

Faith, you see, is *future* oriented, not *past* oriented. One New Testament scholar has written of these verses from Hebrews that the “forward-looking character of faith invests the realm of objective hopes and promises with solidity. It is the property of faith to render hope secure.”¹ Roughly translated, he is saying that because we trust with faith in what God has promised, we are grounded in *God's* ultimate reality, not in the quicksand—the shifting, sometimes frightening landscape—of our culture.

This same New Testament scholar goes on to say: “Faith celebrates *now* the reality of the future blessings that are secured by the promise of God. It recognizes that it is the future, and not the past, that molds the present. . . . faith enables the people of God to enjoy the full certainty of [the promises] future realization.”²

God has promised so much to us. Sometimes we have great difficulty in recognizing one of God's promises when it stands before us. I think of Jesus kneeling in prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane and wonder how he felt about God's promises in that excruciating moment. But God carried through on the promise when he raised Jesus on the third day. And that is the promise that, some days when everything looks as if it is turning to garbage, I try to carry in my heart.

God has promised so much to us. Like our ancestor Abraham, we too are faith sojourners. We remember the words of Jesus as he summoned his first disciples: “Come, follow me [*on the journey*].” And we hear again his words in this morning's gospel reading: “Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. . . . You . . . must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.”

Michel de Montaigne, the Eighteenth Century French essayist, wrote, “There is a power in the universe forever on the side of those brave enough to trust it.”³

Be an Abraham—trust God for your future.

¹William L. Lane, *Hebrews 9-13*, (Dallas: Word Books, 1991), 394.

²*Idem.*, emphasis added.

³Quoted in *Pulpit Resource*, Vol. 29, No. 3 (July-September 2001), 10.