

“Strangers and Pilgrims”

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Now faith is assurance of things hoped for, a conviction of things not seen.² Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval.³ By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible...

⁸By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going. ⁹By faith he became a sojourner in the land of promise, as in a land not his own, dwelling in tents, with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise: ¹⁰For he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God. ¹¹By faith he received power of procreation, even though he was too old—and Sarah herself was barren—because he considered him faithful who had promised. ¹²Therefore from one person, and this one as good as dead, descendants were born, “as many as the stars of heaven and as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore.” ¹³ These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth, ¹⁴for people who speak in this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. ¹⁵If they had been thinking of the land that they had left behind, they would have had opportunity to return. ¹⁶But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; indeed, he has prepared a city for them. (Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16)¹

Through the years, the eleventh chapter of Hebrews has been described as the “hall of fame” of faith. The men and women it references are the “OG’s” of commitment to God. From Abel to Noah, from Isaac and Jacob to Moses and King David. Exemplary women like Rahab and Ruth. All of them listed as people who show us what true faith looks like. And also what it costs. If faith had a home arena, these would be the people whose jerseys would be hanging from the rafters.

And, of all the faithful ancestors listed in this chapter, the one who is praised and emphasized the most is Abraham. Acting in faith, Abraham answered God’s call to leave his homeland and start a long journey to an unknown destination. In faith, Abraham became a nomad, “*a sojourner in the land of God’s promise... a land not his own... dwelling in tents.* In faith, his family went out in search of a dream – an image of a wonderful city, a blessed country that at that point, existed only in the mind of God. Abraham and his people were, as the scripture says, “*strangers and pilgrims on the earth... seeking a homeland.*”

That idea, and that feeling, is familiar to many of us right now. I do not find it a coincidence that God lifted up on this particular Sunday a passage of scripture that is about people who felt like strangers and wandering pilgrims... far from the homeland they once knew... people trusting that God had led them to a place that was meant to be a place of safety, security, and peace... but for now that reality was little more than a faraway dream. They had come in faith based on a glorious promise, but for now, they felt like sojourners in a strange and alien land,

¹ This translation is from the New Revised Standard Version, except for verses 9 and 13, which are from the American Standard Version.



a place not their own.

It is to people just like this that the letter to the Hebrews speaks. Using the examples of Abraham and others like him, the enduring words of this letter reveal to us what true faith is and show us what a life of faith is really like. And it starts with what I would say is one of the most memorable statements about faith in the entire Bible. *“Faith,”* it says, is the *“assurance of things hoped for, a conviction of things not seen.”*

Let’s break that down a bit. First, when the scripture talks about “things hoped for,” that may sound to us like something drawn only from our imagination, a Pollyanna, pie-in-the-sky kind of wish that has no basis in reality. That is not what this means. These hopes are based on the Word of God and the promises of God, things that have been assured by the Creator. It is the faith of the old hymn standard, *“Standing on the promises that cannot fail. When the howling storms of doubt and fear assail, by the living Word of God I shall prevail, standing on the promises of God.”* That is one side of the coin of faith.

The other side is described in the second clause: “a conviction of things not seen.” We stand on the promises of God, and we trust in the Word of God, even when we cannot see them coming true. And that is the hard part, isn’t it? It is hard to hold fast to a vision of something just and right and good when most of what we see is not that way. It is hard to hold out for the dawn when the night around us is cold and dark. But that is the kind of faith that committed people through the ages have mustered. At times, they felt lost in their land. At times, they felt like strangers and foreigners in that land. But they kept their eyes on the horizon and they trusted in the vision of the Promised Land even when they could not see it or feel it. The way was often cold and discouraging, but they held fast to the hope, because, as the scripture says, they *“desired a better country, that is, a heavenly one.”*

So the first lesson from Hebrews 11 is that faith is an *“assurance of things hoped for, a conviction of things not seen.”* The second lesson is that faith is not easy, and it is not without cost. What was it like for Abraham when he first arrived in Canaan, the land that God promised to him and his ancestors? It was not easy. You can imagine that the people who already lived there – people who had been living there for a long, long time -- were not at all interested in just stepping aside, handing Abraham the keys to the kingdom, and moving on. Abraham had to play the long game... he had to work, but work gradually... he had to be ready, but also patient. This is the way one Reformation era commentator, English clergyman Matthew Henry, put it:

“Abraham lived in Canaan, not as heir and proprietor, but as a sojourner only. He did not... raise a war against the old inhabitants, to dispossess them, but contented himself to live as a stranger, to bear their unkindnesses patiently, to receive any favours from them thankfully, and to keep his heart fixed upon his home, the heavenly Canaan. He dwelt in tabernacles with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise. He lived there in an ambulatory moving condition, living in a daily readiness for his removal: and thus should we all live in this world. He had good company with him, and they were a great comfort to him in his sojourning state.”²

Faith has a price. There are dues to be paid, there are indignities to be endured, there are valleys we have to walk and mountains we have to climb. And when the world we dream of is something we strain to see in reality, when the costs and challenges of faith are plentiful

² Matthew Henry, “Commentary on Acts to Revelation,” <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/henry/mhc6.Heb.xii.html>

and the victories are few and far between, it is easy to lose heart.

But, to quote the book I read a few moments ago, this is not a story about failure, or defeat, or hopelessness. This is a story about faith. This is a story about people who took assurance in the promises of God, even when those promises seemed far away. This is a story about strangers and pilgrims who often felt like they were foreigners in a land not their own... but still looked forward to the time when the light would break through the darkness... when justice would roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. And it didn't matter that they could not see it... it didn't matter if it felt like they were losing... they still looked forward to a city that would have firm, unshakable foundations, a city whose architect and builder is God. They died without seeing these promises fulfilled, but still they kept on hoping, kept on seeking a homeland... a better country, that is, a heavenly one.

This is a story about people like Dan West, who even in the midst of war saw a way to help God's people. It is a story about people like Virgil Mock, who stood with him and gave what he had to give to help make a vision of lovingkindness and peace a reality.

This is a story about people like Martin Luther King, Jr., who on the night before an assassin's bullet took his life preached with conviction to a crowd who craved a more just and equitable world. "I don't know what will happen now," he said.

"We've got some difficult days ahead. But it really doesn't matter with me now, because I've been to the mountaintop... Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land!"³

This is not a story about what we are feeling now, or about a future we can see right now. This is a story about Faith.

So, if you are feeling like a sojourner in your own country, a foreigner in your own homeland, a pilgrim looking for something right and good that seems like little more than a dream, then do not despair. You are not in a hopeless situation. You are in the age-old story of Faith.

And you are not alone.

Amen.

³ Martin Luther King, Jr., "I've Been to the Mountaintop," <https://www.americanrhetoric.com>.